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Private Life

Janice Elliott

author of *A State of Peace*

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PRIVATE LIFE

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Also by the same author,
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A State of Peace

Private Life

Janice Elliott

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd., London

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First published 1972 by Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.
Coronet edition 1974

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Printed in Great Britain
for Coronet Books, Hodder Paperbacks Ltd.,
St Paul's House, Warwick Lane, London, EC4P 4AH
by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd.,
Bungay, Suffolk

IBSN 0 340 18669 0

For Sally and Stephen King

It is forbidden to dream again;
We maim our joys or hide them . . .

GEORGE ORWELL

PART ONE

1

THE three women were sitting in the garden of the small house off the Fulham Road. All were married. All wore newish rings on their left hands though Olive Wilson, who now poured the tea, had another gold ring put away in a drawer with the relics of her first marriage: a photograph, a letter from her first husband, Dennis Rawston, that good man. She was not the kind of woman who kept souvenirs of disaster, yet there were some things one could not throw away. Elizabeth, the child of that marriage, rolled on the grass with Polly's bitch.

Olive's new ring was Victorian, wide and rubbed, practical, yet with a beauty of its own. It was an experienced ring, a romantic ring. Her step-sister Catherine's, and Polly's, were altogether more expensive and simpler affairs. Each woman, at some point in the afternoon, unconsciously touched her ring, like a charm.

'Mummy, Suky won't let me kiss her,' Elizabeth protested but did not run to her mother. She was a logical independent child. Loving was expressed in kissing. The dog appeared to love her. Why then, would it not be kissed?

Olive explained: 'Dogs don't much like being kissed. Give her a biscuit, if Polly says you can.'

'Of course you can give Suky a biscuit, darling,' Polly, a heavy woman oppressed by hot weather and courageous corseting, rose all the same with surprising lightness from her deckchair to take Elizabeth's hand. They hid the biscuit in a clump of long grass The dog, well trained, waited trembling for the command. 'Come, Suky! Find!' The child pulled away and ran after the dog. Her short, round legs were still uncertain, and she stumbled and fell. There was a moment when she might have cried, but Polly scooped her up. 'Come on then, let's help Suky.'

She came back puffed. Olive grinned. 'You spoil her.'

'Why not?' Two years ago Polly had married, she admitted, more or less frankly, to have children. Olive wondered how

much the miscarriage had mattered to her, if she pined. She seemed content enough, kept up a few of her old committees, was richly married; she led an upholstered, social country life Olive found it entertaining enough to visit but could not conceive for herself. Yet once they had had much in common—work, a way of life; they could still speak in the shorthand of people who have felt the same things strongly, in the same place and at the same time. This had been immediately after the war in Dennis Rawston's group, a hopeless crusade, as Olive now saw it, of amateur do-gooders, defeated in a way by their own undirected enthusiasm. Times had changed. Now, in the fifties, bureaucracy discouraged amateurism. Everything had become at once greyer and more efficient. It was hard to imagine today the kind of crisis of dogma which had split the group. Politics, pie-in-the-sky socialism had made them; disillusion with socialism had broken them. Of all issues, the communist flirtation which had so disturbed Polly, seemed the most irrelevant, a symptom which had appeared at the time to be a cause.

Polly might have been thinking along the same lines because when Elizabeth screamed and Catherine ran down the garden to rescue her from the nettles, she remarked, 'Did you see Dennis on television last night? I thought he looked rather well. Do you ever hear from him?'

'Hardly.' Olive's voice was level, though those were times she could never coolly recall. When Polly said that Dennis looked well on television she was saying in her heavy-handed Polly way, that he had survived the loss of his wife and child and consequent nervous breakdown. For a woman of definite opinions, her attitude to Olive's remarriage had always been ambivalent. She would have said that one did not leave one's husband. That was a principle. Yet Olive's new marriage was clearly a success and Elizabeth unscathed, so far as one could see. So she said nothing, came for tea and left before Olive's peculiar communist husband returned.

Olive knew all this and went on: 'Not from him, but of h'm. Through my ex-father-in-law. Dennis is running that model settlement that's on the box every night and he's always on some committee or commission or something. Whenever they want integrity they send for Dennis.' If there was irony in her voice, Olive did not intend it. After all, she knew well enough if Dennis had been wretched she would have paid in guilt. Her loyalty

had always been her most cumbersome quality. His happiness must set her free. 'It's funny, I always said that if any of us survived, it would be Dennis. I was right, after all. Those were strange times, weren't they? Marvellous and awful. That frightful house. Yet when they knocked it down I couldn't bear it. Unfit for human habitation, they said. There's a block of flats there now, you know; they'll be the slums of the year 2000. But of course you never lived there, did you?'

'I still miss it though. I don't talk about it to Edward, he'd be bored.' Suky ran back to Polly. She fondled the dog, exposing the pink insides of her silky ears. Olive thought, Polly is a rich woman with a spoiled dog, I know nothing about her. Oh well, what did one know of anyone? Polly said suddenly, quietly: 'You don't know how much I envied you all living in that house. I used to dream about it. I still do.'

Olive laughed: 'One loo and Tim and Dulcie Connor and all those kids! I don't know how we stuck it so long. It was falling down round our ears and we didn't see it. We didn't see much then, did we? Do you suppose anyone feels now as we did then? Did I tell you Bob's son's coming home, Alan? He's been in Malaya. The idea scares me a bit. Do you feel sometimes you can't look the young in the face?'

Polly smiled. 'You've still got your social conscience then, Olive? You can't really give it up, can you, even now?'

Though her tone was light this was one of those curious moments peculiar to female relationships when the risk of genuine intimacy might be taken, the choice between all or nothing can no longer be evaded. Olive swept up the tray, scuffed the grass with her brown, sandalled feet: sensible competent feet. 'Oh, I've no time for all that now.' This was true. She was happily married, handsome in a more sensual way than she had ever been in her twenties, at thirty a happy woman, who could perfectly well absorb effortlessly her step-son's return. It was simply that she was genuinely unable to answer Polly's question, partly because it was Polly who asked it. For Polly, the large, rich woman set on conception, those times had become a picture. Olive could never see them like that.

From the scullery window, up to the elbows in suds, Olive saw her younger step-sister, Catherine, playing with Elizabeth in the deep grass they had never got around to cutting, and now it would need a scythe. The seed was carried by the wind and

each season reclaimed more of the small garden. Polly looked out of place, a queen mother on a spree.

Olive put the cups and plates to drain on the rack. She wiped her hands, fetched the meat from the small refrigerator, laid it on the unridged end of the wooden draining board, trimmed it and beat it. She had already put a light under the oil in the casserole. She chopped the meat, floured it and dropped it in the hot oil. She added tomatoes, a couple of sliced peppers, onions, then stock, turned down the heat and stirred with a wooden spoon. On the windowsill was a small slate. Still blending the flour with the stock, she wrote 'garlic'. She reached for the bottle of Algerian wine, added some to the casserole, poured the rest into a glass, drank and pulled a face. She waited for the casserole to simmer, still stirring but with less concentration.

Polly took the deckchair. Catherine sat on the grass at her feet They would both return to rich husbands. They got on very well, shopped at the same places, shared a decorator, a dressmaker and a gynaecologist. They marvelled at the improvisations Bob and Olive had wrought in the Fulham house. Catherine waved. Olive smiled, aware of her own image preparing her husband's dinner. She would carry this image through the next hour when it would be necessary to bath Elizabeth and give her her supper, while keeping an eye on the casserole The oven was unreliable. As soon as Elizabeth was prepared for bed Bob would be home and Olive would tell him that Polly and Catherine had come for the afternoon, and he would ask what did they do? She would say, 'Oh, nothing special. One of those female afternoons' Then she would make it sound more interesting than it actually had been. She might even be faintly malicious about it. In Bob's eyes she felt safe. Did one exist only in other people's eyes? She was alone so little nowadays she had no idea.

Catherine was leaving 'Have you seen mother lately?'

'I thought I might go tonight if I skip Elizabeth's bath.'

Catherine looked thankful. When she had left Polly stood for a moment in the door, swinging her car keys. Olive took the casserole off the asbestos mat and put it in the oven. She decided to feed Elizabeth now, then she could stop her mother stuffing the child with sweets. She washed the wooden spoon and the chopping knife, wiped the draining board and fetched some stewed fruit and cereal from the refrigerator. She scooped

up Elizabeth, put her in the high chair and tied an apron round her neck.

'I'm sure it will be all right,' said Polly.

'What?'

'With Alan.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure it will.'

Polly left. 'I'll see myself out.' She turned at the door and remarked: 'You're the picture of a happy woman.'

Olive filled Elizabeth's mug with milk and began to scrape potatoes. She would rather have liked to sit down, drink some more of that rotten red wine and smoke a cigarette. She would have liked to say to Polly, look, you and I can't talk to one another so why do we go on being friends? Is it enough to have past in common? When women marry they are divorced from each other, which may be why Catherine and I always finish by talking about our mother. Yet I really do love Catherine. 'Yes,' she said lightly, 'I'm happy.' And so I am, she thought; and so I am.

'So you've come to see Granny then.'

'How are you, mother?' Olive's visits to her mother round the corner in Kensington always followed the same formula. Mrs. Armitage complained. Olive listened or appeared to listen, murmured a comment and smoked too much. She never went without Elizabeth who was a shield, and, Olive had to admit to herself, a propitiatory sacrifice. Mrs. Armitage burned with love for her grandchild. Her love for Elizabeth, perhaps the only direct and simple feeling she had ever known in her life, Olive found ironic and painfully touching. In this area her mother was entirely vulnerable and Olive had long given up trying to puzzle the mysterious bond between the child and Mrs. Armitage; she learned to be grateful for it, as a factor which made it possible to sustain a civilised relationship with her mother. And why not?

Mrs. Armitage was talking. Olive had only heard half what she said. It was something to do with the upstairs lodgers blocking the lavatory. Once Mrs. Armitage had lived in the whole house. In the war they had let a couple of rooms then Mrs. Armitage had retreated to this one room. A woman once of some style and large gestures, she seemed physically to have made herself smaller. She might have been rubbing herself out.

One day, Olive thought, she would arrive and find nothing but a pile of clothes.

'Really, mother,' she said reasonably, 'they seem quite a harmless couple. You've only got to speak to them . . .'

Mrs. Armitage brushed this aside. She hoped she would never become that kind of landlady! She affected humorously to despise her tenants and had little to do with them, but Olive knew how much she depended on them: their tread, their presence in the house, even the nuisance they caused was evidence of life. The lavatory affair would be drawn out for a week or a month and when that was settled there would be something else. If Olive had offered to go upstairs and deal with them Mrs. Armitage would have been lost and distressed, her occupation gone.

'Isn't it rather late for Elizabeth to be up?'

'She's had her supper. I've only got to put her to bed.'

'No sweeties then.' Mrs. Armitage was talking to the child, who at once began to grizzle. Olive's resolve collapsed. She shrugged, lit another cigarette, moved to the window. After all, did it really matter?

It seemed incredible now to remember herself as she had once been in his room: rebellious, dealing with Mrs. Armitage with an icy competence that was worse than open war. She had learned to manage, to live on the surface here. Apparently, she got on with her mother. It would be too dark, too perilous to question her motives. Am I so reduced, she pondered vaguely but without pain? Am I come to this? But the thought was light as a moth and probably as unimportant. It passed.

'When are you coming to stay with Granny again?' Somewhere stowed away in this over-crammed room was a folding cot and other equipment for Elizabeth.

Olive said steadily: 'Mother, you know she's too much for you now. She still wakes at five and she's not dry yet.' Mrs. Armitage had had a slight stroke last winter. It had never been named and the only sign that remained was a slackness to the left side of her face when she dozed, as she did nowadays more often than she realised. Olive felt that her mother was no longer strong enough to undertake the care of a small, energetic child. She also had a dread that Mrs. Armitage might be taken ill while Elizabeth was alone with her: Elizabeth screaming while her grandmother lay paralysed, possibly dead. Elizabeth, as might be expected, was clamouring now to stay. Olive quietened

her and distracted her with a drink of milk and a biscuit. While she was getting the milk she put on the kettle. 'Have you thought any more about living with Aunt Cat?'

'You know I can't stand the country.' This was true. Mrs. Armitage had always said that if people were made to live in the country, they would go on all fours. Olive had a theory that her mother was jealous of nature: the way it got on with its own affairs and took no account of her. 'Besides, I do well enough on my own. After a certain age women should not live together. Your aunt has got very odd.' She began to tell a maliciously funny story about her last stay with her sister and in so doing became younger and more cheerful. In the old days it had always been hard not to laugh when she set out to amuse you, though Olive had done her best to resist. Her attitude then had been simple: Mrs. Armitage had made a party out of the war. She had cheerfully fiddled her way through it, dabbling like a clever child in the black market, attempting to keep the party going as long as there was anything to be got on the side. Olive had been shocked and had shown that she was shocked. She wondered now if she had been a prig. She had grown more tolerant, or lazier, or simply happier. There were darker reasons. Once, her mother had seemed impossible, incredible, a dinosaur, a monster prepared to let anyone perish so long as she lived, to drive her own daughter, Catherine, out of her mind. Lately she had shrunk to an old woman, lonely, shrill, and too small for her clothes. Somewhere, in the ferocious aftermath of the war when one seemed to hear of nothing but suffering and defeat, an anarchy of mind and spirt, Olive had understood that the distance between herself and her mother, though unbridgeable, was not so great. Bearing Elizabeth alone, exiled from both husband and lover, in drugged parturition, through the weariness, the trivial apparatus and strange loss of childbirth, she had understood vaguely that the essence, which was oneself, was not to be taken for granted. Was it possible that that was all that counted in the end, that Mrs. Armitage was right? That Olive herself might speak one day with her mother's voice? Me, she could hear herself saying, in those same shrill tones, me-me-me, see me, I am.

'Pigeons!' concluded Mrs. Armitage. 'The pigeons were crawling with maggots. And the vicar ate them up, every wriggly bit.'

Olive laughed. The kettle was boiling. She warmed the pot, emptied it, put in three scoops of tea and waited for the kettle to come to the boil again. At home she never bothered with warming the pot; mostly, they drank coffee from mugs. Here she put the milk in a jug and found a curious, self-punishing pleasure in arranging the tray exactly as Mrs. Armitage would like it. Why bother to placate this old woman and on the other hand, why not? If it made life easier. After all, her mother was in a way admirable. She lived alone comforted by habits, by memorable clutter. Behind her trivial complaints she hid, Olive guessed, a terror of death comparable only to a child's fears in the dark, to one's first understanding of mortality. Olive was torn by pity and fear for her mother. If she had been a stranger she would have done anything to help her. As a daughter, she was wary. When they had finished their tea she said: 'We'll have to go now, mother.'

As soon as she spoke, Mrs. Armitage withdrew again, became querulous and critical. Shouldn't Elizabeth be talking properly by now? Did she ever see her father? It was not right to keep a child from its father.

'Oh, mother, you know you never liked Dennis. Or did you? Have you been seeing him?'

'I would never do anything behind your back. But the fact remains, he is the father of your child.'

Soon after Elizabeth's birth Olive had suspected that Mrs. Armitage and Dennis were in league to take Elizabeth from her. She put this down now as a post-natal fantasy. It was all quite irrational, yet suddenly she felt close to tears. She had a whole happy life she must hide from her mother, yet why?

On the way down she met one of the upstairs tenants, a thin, shy girl, very young. It was hard to imagine what on earth she might have dared to put down the lavatory. She made herself embarrassingly flat against the wall for Olive to pass, murmured something about the weather, looked as if she might cry from shyness, then called after Olive: 'Your mother is such a dear old lady.'

Olive smiled. Before she could think of an adequate reply the girl had bolted up the stairs.

Back home, Olive made herself intensely busy. She checked

the casserole, turned down the oven and put plates to warm. She bathed Elizabeth and let her play for a while in the shallow water. Then she dried her, dusted her with talc, made her ready for bed and put her in her cot. Normally, she made a point of talking to the child but tonight she was distracted. Elizabeth understood this and whimpered.

'"Once upon a time there were three little kittens, and their names were Mittens, Tom Kitten and Moppet".'

Did Elizabeth understand a word she was saying? Probably not. Her mother was a large, powerful, talking figure, speaking of cats.

Polly said, you're the picture of a happy woman; it will be all right with Alan.

Olive was known for her competence. Her voice ran on:

'"They had dear little fur coats of their own; and they tumbled about the doorstep and played in the dust".'

Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit was a liar. She said they had measles but they'd lost their clothes. Elizabeth yawned, thrust her knuckles in her mouth and her other hand across her eyes, but she would not give way so easily to sleep, Olive knew. At what age did one cease this battle against oblivion, surrender thankfully? She read on automatically, her mind only half on the story. '"Then he and Jemima and Rebeccah Puddle-Duck set off up the road, keeping step—pit pat, paddle pat! pit pat, waddle pat!"' Why did children need to be frightened? Jemima Puddle-Duck set so ignorantly on her self-destruction, Flopsy Bunny grieving for the babies she believed to be dead; these were the passages Elizabeth made Olive read again and again. They excited her as if there were something in these horrors she instinctively recognised and needed to face again and again. Yet she was a happy, sensible child, much less trouble, Olive knew, than most infants of her age. If she had a grievance she announced it but soon forgot it and rarely bore a grudge. Without being in the least spiritless she had an odd, unchildlike way of first examining and then accepting or appearing to accept the inevitable. The only trace of hysteria she showed was in her reaction to these stories, yet she begged for them, and would not be put off with thinner stuff. Polly had remarked once that there was something odd about children nowadays—surely we hadn't been like that? Polly had the

imagination to put forward such a proposition, but not enough to pursue it, yet Olive understood. It was as if the children had undergone some pre-natal disillusion or horror which meant that they were born older, more wary. In moments of exhaustion or mild drunkenness Olive wondered if women who bore children now were not dumb vessels to mutants or visitors from another planet. But then she was enchanted, as always, by the straightforward physical contact with Elizabeth, the trusting passion which would probably be the simplest feeling either would ever know in their lives. This at least must be pure, surely?

Elizabeth had given up the fight. She was asleep. Olive heard Bob come in. She pulled the curtains, sorted Elizabeth's clothes —those to be worn in the morning and those to be washed—and went downstairs.

'Good day?'

'Polly and Catherine came.'

Bob nodded. He was washing at the sink, his shirt off. His close cropped hair, soft as a mole's, was greying. There was a precision, a completion, about all his movements, a containment, as if he were capable of great strength but gave to each task only and exactly the energy required. When Olive met him he was a tallyclerk in the docks, a local councillor and a leading activist on behalf of the Communist Party. He had given up all this to join his brother at the Fulham garage. Business had been slow at first, with post-war restrictions, but they were doing well now. He seemed happy enough and remarked only with the mildest dryness that he was becoming a bloated capitalist. Olive laughed but she knew that for Bob these words held still, in spite of himself, a real meaning.

Early in their relationship Olive had imagined that for all his gentleness and honesty there would always be a contained and secret part of Bob to which she would never be admitted, which might some day take him off, away from her. She no longer saw him leaving her but she did wonder still if this secrecy were not an inevitable, perhaps a necessary part, of even the happiest marriage. Bob's ideal, political and personal, was that people should live in freedom together. Which meant that a man and a woman living together should have secrets which the other must not devour. Olive's secret was the hungry female who desired

both shamefully and triumphantly to bind all those who loved her with cords of iron. Bob knew this well enough, she guessed, but would never speak of it unless she confessed it first. This was an act of discretion between them as vital as the act of love.

For all their discretion Olive knew that she was open to Bob. Once this had alarmed her; by now she was used to being understood. When slightly tight or bored by domesticity she raged against her own transparency. In mad moments she wished to run somewhere where no one knew her. But she stayed and gave herself away all the time.

They had eaten. Olive picked up some sewing, frowned at the failing light and put it down. Bob was waiting for her to tell him.

'You've been to your mother's?' He took her arm and they walked out into the small garden, his hand under her elbow. Olive stooped and pulled at a weed. It held and she broke it off, leaving the root in the earth.

Why should she hate me? Olive wondered. 'She seems so old now. Quite suddenly. I think we ought to have her here, but I'm not sure I could stand it.'

'Why couldn't you stand it?'

'I don't know. I don't love her. I don't even feel particularly guilty about her. Just responsible. Yet the only kind of responsibility I can accept is one I've chosen—like you and Elizabeth—and that's not a responsibility at all in the sense I mean.' It seemed to Olive, possessed in this moment by bleakness, that happiness always demanded a sacrifice on someone's part. To live with Dennis she had abandoned her mother, neglected her stepsister, Catherine, when she most needed her. To this happy marriage she had sacrificed Dennis. To the same end, she had long suspected, Bob had gone in with his brother simply to make money. Bob had said once that the worst phrase ever coined was the pursuit of happiness. He was right, of course. It could be said that she had walled herself up with her own happiness, that content had made her greedy and ruthless, yet she could not worry too much about this. Talk of old times with Polly, and the visit to her mother, had troubled her, but only vaguely. She was back now on an even keel. 'Anyway,' Olive concluded, 'there's no question of having her here, with Alan

coming back.'

'You won't mind that?'

'Why should I?'

'I love you,' he said.

She shivered. 'Let's go in, it's getting cold.'

They walked up the path with arms linked. Olive took a deep breath. The air in the city nowadays was probably poisonous but it tasted good.

'I'll stay out for a bit. If I don't get at those nettles they'll seed.'

'No writing tonight?' Bob shook his head. Six months after they were married Bob had started to write. Olive was glad of this, aware of the impotence he had felt since he broke with the Party (though he had not yet left it). Had they pinned too much on private life? There was a peace group he had talked about but not joined. Olive wondered how he would react if she told him of the telephone call she had had that day from her ex-husband, Dennis. Apparently there was this home for victims of the Second World War who had been washed up like flotsam in England and for political or medical reasons could not be repatriated. Most had more or less survived the concentration camps and were kept alive to make baskets or grow vegetables or count their fingers by such as Dennis. Olive could imagine vividly and puzzled why do-gooders should always be so utterly dreary. Happiness had made her sceptical of an occupation which had once been her own.

So five years after (would there never be an end to the consequences of that war?) a few had been patched up and were now fit enough to work and to live a more or less normal life. There was this Polish Jew. If Olive couldn't take him in would she meet him, would she at least visit the home? Could Broda call and see her? It was out of the question, of course.

Bob began to slash at the nettles with a hand-scythe. He always enjoyed working with his hands, it eased him, freed his mind. When he first joined his brother, Jack, in the garage the best times had been the hours he spent bringing clapped-out engines back to life. Even now, with the business expanding and full-time mechanics, this was the side Bob preferred. Jack, the wide boy, said Bob should have been a bloody surgeon. Jack

kept his hands clean. Bob grinned. The light was going but he worked on.

Indoors Olive stood for a moment in the dark, seemed to feel the city breathe more steadily around her, relaxed in the dusk; in a window across the gardens a girl walked from side to side, a baby in her arms. A dog barked and another answered, the sounds sharp in the thin air, and all above there was the loom of light which made it look from a distance as if the city were burning.

She was thirty. This was June. In another part of the world there was Korea. Thirty, June, Korea, though she tested them for meaning the words which would once have held so much were light, nearly empty. She herself, who had once been so alert to the loaded symbol (age, time, month of the year, everything coloured, strong, time to be spent, spilled, above all, used), found herself now weightless in an area of no time, tethered to the earth by the mildest cords of habit and inclination. Husband, child, house, cooking, reading, talking, friends. Once life had been action. That had been the time of running. She had now a different—though as rich—a sense of life, but also of waiting, as if this time too were only a season. She could imagine Dulcie Connor, who had vanished with her anarchist husband to God-knew-where, Dulcie saying with a cigarette in her mouth and a kid slung over her shoulder: well, love, that's life, that's how it goes on. And how can you bear it, she had cried once, how can anyone bear it? That had been Dulcie once. Dulcie had also been, Olive always felt, in touch with a continuum which had nothing to do with courage or renewal but simply flowed, succouring itself. Women were supposed to have this gift, but most did not, only the idiots, and the child-bearers and the rare ones like Dulcie.

Should she get a job (practical difficulties there, because of Elizabeth)? Should she have another baby? Should she take in a Jew? Should they move to the country? They were creatures of the city, they would go on as they were, and why not?

'Why not?' she said aloud to herself and smiled at her dim reflection in the mirror, the smudged face of a strong and handsome woman in her prime. Then she snapped on all the lights and the house glowed, another warm cell in the cellular city.

And within this one organism were individual cells, her rooms which she knew by touch and smell as well as by sight. Within these limits, for the time being, her spirit was perfectly at home and contained. She emptied the ashtrays, laid the breakfast table and went to see her child.

2

STANDING at the rail he watched the ship put away the wedges of sea. As they ploughed further north Alan Wilson saw how the light changed, grew thinner, more fragile and finally sickly till they entered a venomous, bile-green Channel. For the first time since they left Malaya the vessel lost its dumb equilibrium, pitching and groaning as short, mean seas fought it out with a south-westerly squall. Alone on deck he squinted through the flying spume and drizzle for a sight of land. When it came—the Isle of Wight humped sullenly offshore—he looked for green but saw only a desolate weeping shape made itself of rain and mist.

'Home are the heroes.' Another soldier Alan vaguely recognised joined him at the rail. Both were R.A.M.C. and had been orderlies at different bases. Alan's hadn't even been a base but a transit camp for supplies, for men on the way out, casualties on their way back to H.Q. hospital or not as the case might be for those too far gone who died in the ropey medical ward.

They lit cigarettes in the shield of their greatcoat collars but the salt soaked nicotine tasted foul. 'You a medic too?'

Alan nodded. Small-talk was hardly practical. The wind snatched at their words and carried them away. They found a nest beneath a lifeboat where their eyes were on a level with the sea, a vicious colour still but now less violent in sheltered waters. The wind, half-defeated, tore at the higher rigging.

'A crumby war.'

'Better than the new one.'

The soldier nodded sardonically. He had a thin, yellow face. Alan had noticed him the first night out because he seemed older and kept to himself. About halfway back the rest had begun to talk compulsively of their families but this one did not join in. Neither did Alan.

'How long?'

'Twenty minutes.'

The engines had stopped straining and settled down to the

dull thrum which had accompanied them, like a heartbeat, from Malaya.

'What'll you do then?'

Alan shrugged. 'Look around.' The land closed in on both sides, claiming the ship. Perhaps it was inhabited after all. The jungle had always seemed to him on the point of delivering a message, though it never did. At night, when he could not sleep, he imagined the intricate pattern of radio signals crackling all over the peninsula through the jungle which never stopped talking. Before he had even left Malaya he missed it, not the country he knew, but as it might have been. Perhaps it was always like that with countries, they could be perfect and they never were. But if you never went you never knew did you? 'You?'

There was a shaft of sun on Ports Down, not much but enough to hope.

'Off to the other mess, I suppose.'

'You're staying in?' Alan was incredulous. You did it because if you didn't they shut you up which was marginally worse than being shut up in a war.

'I'm a lifer more or less. Signed on at the end of the last show. It's not so bad, you get used to it.'

'I never would in a million years.'

'You're a pacifist?'

'I'd never thought. I don't believe in war, that's true.' Alan pondered. In their sheltered corner an intimacy had been spun between them. His companion seemed to have none of the regular's contempt for the national service yobs. They smoked, sharing a flame. Someone had ditched the garbage and the gulls pounced like buzzards on the wake. One flew close to their faces, its eyes malevolent, its beak red-tipped. Alan confessed: 'I nearly skipped when they called me up, but I didn't fancy life on the run So I thought, I'll just write off the next couple of years and I suppose it might not be so bad. It seemed a way to get out of the country, at least.

'Then I thought, Malaya might be fine if it weren't for the rotten fighting. So maybe when I got there I'd just say thanks for the ride and nip off into the jungle.' He grinned. 'I was going to carry a notice saying "No politics. I'm on the side of the human race." They wouldn't have had to shoot me. I'd have lasted about half an hour. But you know what I did before they nabbed me?' A boyish enthusiasm burst through, making him

smile. 'I walked round England, all over.'

'How did you live?'

'Odd jobs. Washing up. I even worked on a farm. I'd hardly seen a cow before in my life let alone a field, but that was a good job, the best one. I nearly stayed. That was in Essex. We come from round there a long time back. It's a queer place, a bit creepy. The sea comes in for miles as if it can't leave the land alone and there's some marvellous birds, not that I'd know one from another. I liked Essex.'

'It sounds all right. What about your people?' There was a clatter of boots on the companionway. The soldier jerked his head: 'The dead awake. They didn't mind you going off?'

Alan rose, stiff, and they walked to the stern. 'My mother died in the war—not because of the war, but in it. I don't remember much about her. My father married again just before I went off on this luxury cruise. She's not bad, I quite like her.' Alan realised that he had not spoken so much of himself since he was home, since he was a child in fact. 'I'm going on, aren't I, and I don't even know you.' He saw now that the man had a scar down his face, from ear to nose to lip to chin which accounted not only for his look of irony but for his job. The man saw him looking and Alan was embarrassed. It came between them, this mark of the last righteous war that might ever be fought in the history of the world. And didn't they let you know it, how they won the war.

'I don't mind, I like listening. I do a lot of it, one way and another.'

Alan was suddenly intensely curious about this soldier. Time was running out. The ship, like a fat swimming lady, swung into harbour, breasting the little boats. There was a panic to get kit up on deck, that sodding sergeant having his last fling. 'What was it like, the last lot?'

'Not what the glory-boys tell you.' The corporal pondered. 'It was being bored or scared shitless, nothing in between. And you go on, and you swear by God if you get out you'll never go again, but if that's all you know you do go, again and again. The worst thing about people is what they can get used to. All I can say is, never get used to anything.'

They threw their cigarettes into the gull-flecked water. Alan stayed for a while to watch the wake, creaming behind them. He was almost the last off. This was a landfall he had no wish to

make. He paused at the top of the gangway and saw his friend walking alone, his kit slung on his back, a death's head, a man of impenetrable sorrows, stalking through scenes of reunion and rejoicing. It seemed to Alan, in a flash of bitterness and pathos, that he had been talking to no one but himself, that he was alone, that he had nowhere in the world to go.

'Where you off to then?' said someone.

'Home,' he replied. In the train, after a cup of tea, he didn't feel so bad.

'Where's that?'

'London.'

'London's a fine city.' Alan nodded. Then he dropped off and let the train carry him to the fine city.

'Alan?'

Olive always knew when Bob was awake. He didn't stir but she tensed his tension and could not sleep herself. She went to fetch cigarettes from the dressing table. On the way back to bed she flicked open the curtain. No moon but the apple tree was there. He had given her vision, the house with the garden and the tree in a certain place. He had given them to her at the right moment and in the right way, which was more important than the gift itself. In the darkness she sensed him smiling. 'It's not run away then?'

'It's there.' She did not immediately light her cigarette but lay with her cheek against his wrist, her body curled. She felt rich. She could fill this house with dogs, cats, babies or simply move from room to room The sash on the bedroom window wanted mending. She could sand the kitchen floor. She had a sense of her house. He did not feel this, she knew. Bob rested lightly in houses, always ready to move, a camping life. 'You're worried about Alan?'

'I could never get through to him.'

'Did you ever try?'

'You don't smash in where you're not asked.'

'You did with me.'

'You were asking for it and you got what you deserved.' He ran a hand idly down her thigh. 'I married a skinny bitch and now I've got a fat cat.'

She bit his hand. 'I told Polly today, I can't look the young in the face.'

'So what did Polly say?'

'Polly said I couldn't grow out of my social conscience.'

'Your friend Polly ought to have a lot of babies.'

Olive sat up stiff with rage. Old attitudes die hard. 'So that's what you prescribe for an unhappy woman—have babies. For a revolutionary you're quaintly old-fashioned.'

'I'm not a revolutionary any more. And I said Polly should have babies because she wants them.'

Olive was not yet quite ready to laugh. 'Only happy women should even think of having babies.'

He pulled her back by her shoulders. 'Your friend Polly was right in a way. You're still an extremist.'

They mocked each other. 'And what are you? Say it.'

'I'm a mean capitalist bastard with sentimental pinkish leanings. And I intend to screw you into the floor. What are you?'

'I'm a happy woman.'

It didn't seem to matter much tonight who came when or at all. It was a cheerful exercise between free friends, coarse and good-tempered, so Olive could say straight into his face: 'Dennis has got a Jew he wants us to have.'

Later, when they lay back smoking, Olive realised she had forgotten something. Oh well, come Jews, come babies, come all.

Towards morning he woke her. 'You were crying.'

He didn't believe in happiness or in love. He thought they were bad names for greed. He had stormed her, burned down her castle all that time ago and it seemed they were happily finished, settled in a safe place. Once he had thought you could apply the revolutionary principle to private life. The marriage is the state, a necessary structure which after a time will wither-away of its own accord, leaving comrades in freedom. Perhaps it might work like that for a man. Possibly women were despicable. Olive had never had much use for her own sex. Yet she was a woman and however great her compassion for her husband, the facts of politics, of life itself, were surely on her side?

3

OLIVE yelled for Elizabeth to leave Bob alone. She was all right, he called back. Da, said Elizabeth experimentally. Bob swallowed his coffee and gave Elizabeth a sip, forbidden. He tasted her cheek, cool, sweet, felt her firm body. In his fighting life with Moira there hadn't been much time for this. He had forgotten his son's childhood, Moira had tried to steal the boy; she'd failed, and with scruple Bob had never attempted to win him, perhaps even held him off. While he and Moira wrestled the boy was shut outside, and then there was the war. The world must have seemed all war to Alan, indoors and out. Da. I'm not really your Da, Elizabeth—very gently. She didn't believe and roared with laughter at the joke. Once a month, though not lately, she was taken to see the man, not her Da. She was polite and put up with it, waiting to go back.

'You're going in then?' Olive appeared at the door in an old dressing-gown of Bob's. In the early morning her competence deserted her, she woke. and always had done, stunned and full of grief, her dark hair wild, her face blazing white. At her mildest, she was sleepwalking, at her worst, looking for prey. This aspect of her Bob found most moving and vulnerable, a fact she could never understand. He did not kiss her. At this time of day she did not like to be touched. He checked his pockets for cigarettes and wallet, car keys.

'Why not?'

'Alan?'

'He may not get here till tomorrow. There'll be time. There's all the time in the world.' Anxious, he reassured her, it would be all right.

Fighting her horror of the morning, she laid her lips against his and each said to the other, don't worry.

Olive gave Elizabeth her cereal, took a gulp of Bob's cold coffee and went to the door. She scooped up letters and papers.

Two bills. An unfunny postcard from her brother, Chris, ex-navy, ex-smuggler, ex-con, currently and for ever until he was dead married by virtue of defeat to Mary Owens, his keeper; who had stood by him, as they say, through thick and thin; who was entirely admirable; and whom Olive could not stomach, given all the charity, all the justice in her heart. And they met once a year, and three or four times a year Chris sent her dirty seaside postcards which did, in fact, amuse her, but made her cry. She put this aside to think about later. She groped for cigarettes in her dressing-grown pocket and shuffled back to the kitchen reading the unavoidable headlines. CRISIS IN KOREA. FESTIVAL OFF?

She heated up the coffee, heaved Elizabeth out of her high chair, poured her some milk, and carried the two mugs outside. She settled herself in the basket seat. This had been there, as if waiting, when they first saw the neglected and abandoned house: everything ruined, broken, falling to bits except for this chair. Someone might have been sitting in the sun, suddenly risen and walked out of the house never to come back. Olive knew nothing of the people who had lived here before. She did not seek to know, but she felt obscurely glad of the chair, as if the past could warm you.

The thickening sun healed her morning rage. She felt ripe and generous. The cat which arrived every day from nowhere made its usual appearance and was allowed to drink milk from Elizabeth's saucer. It had been as rejected and wild as the house and garden, but now it grew fat and smug. Every day Elizabeth said, our cat? And every day Olive explained, no, darling, not our cat.

'Our cat?'

Olive nodded. The cat knew already, as surely as if its paws had been buttered. Why not our cat? The cat lay down in the sun to clean itself, paying particular attention to its private parts, which made Olive remember last night and smile, the love overlapping from then for the cat and the child. The cat possessed them but was not possessed. The cat looked up at her, narrow pupils in amber eyes and she looked back. There was always a rivalry between women and cats: the cat-spirit of the woman and the knowledge of the cat.

CRISIS IN KOREA.

'What's that, love?' Elizabeth was holding a card which must

have fallen from among the newspapers. Olive reached for it but went on reading. FESTIVAL OFF? DOWN THE DRAIN WITH £11 MILLION? As usual, the trivial and the apocalyptic boiled down together.

She read the postcard, typewritten, no signature:

Comrades unite to resist imperialist aggression
against North Korea

Whether this was a statement of fact or an exhortation was not clear. They had this kind of thing sometimes through Bob's old connections. On the day everything went up, Olive thought, some maniac would be crouched over a typewriter in some greasy attic pounding out his message to an unlistening world.

While she smiled Olive did not mock, she sympathised. She had delivered enough messages of her own, in her time, might do again, though the possibility seemed now remote. She had been and remained vaguely a socialist, that is, she adhered to the principles of socialism yet saw daily all around her proof of her instinctive distrust of politics. Bob had said once that they were the only stinking way of getting things done and Dennis had come to feel the same. Now everything that happened seemed to discredit politics, but put nothing in their place. Having rejected politics, Bob found himself at the best groping, at the worst impotent, Olive knew that, and was herself powerless to help. Dennis would survive. He was a moral opportunist. Bob lived harshly with himself. He could not forget his first faith however many times he recanted. What a rage we lived in then, she thought, and it seemed impossible that she had ever been so angry.

Olive pushed the card in her dressing-gown pocket. How can a man live? Bob asked, without speaking, and she replied dumbly, ashamed of her content, as we do, as we are. So I accept my mother and know that my child will come to hate me and we pay in degrees of freedom for a happy life. One survives, it is astonishing how often one survives.

The cat had understood. It moved, fastidiously high-stepping, through the house. Elizabeth and Olive trailed after it, anxious for its approval. Olive offered the cat a box lined with an old blanket. It did not so much accept as allow itself to be given the box. It would decide later, in its own time, if the box

was good enough. Meanwhile, it was hungry.

'Thanks very much, I'm sure,' said Olive and was horrified to find it was ten o'clock. She dressed quickly, made a list, strapped Elizabeth into her push-chair and went shopping. They got back at twelve. Olive had bought a chicken. She would do something with it and they could eat it tonight if Alan came, or save it till tomorrow. The telephone rang. Wrong number. The telephone rang again. Polly was driving up to some committee or other, something to do with spastic children. They could use all the help they could get. Was Olive interested, should she pick her up?

'Polly, I told you I haven't time for all that now.' I never had time for Polly's committees and I'm not starting now. She could just see herself, in scuffed, dirty sandals, Elizabeth on her lap, madam chairman this and well yes, I can type, yes I suppose I could address those, fix that. She'd been a dogsbody once but never in her life, so far as she could remember, had she sat on a committee. In the old madhouse days with Dennis and the club and the squatters and Tim Connor and his bombs: every day, it had seemed, someone bleeding on her doorstep, to be patched up, bailed out by Olive, good old Olive, Olive will cope.

There had been meetings, certainly, cell meetings, group meetings, mad Tim Connor making Polly cry, Dennis and Bob arguing all night. Olive, making tea, making notes, fetching beer, had found it all in time faintly absurd (just tell me what use is the *Daily Worker* to the starving and the homeless? not to mention Hiroshima though, my God, we go on about it enough). But at least it all seemed marginally nearer the front line than Polly's posh committees of menopausal ladies. Have we sunk, or have we just come to our senses? Whichever, it's called living with the bomb.

'Olive?'

'Sorry, Polly. It's not my sort of thing.'

'Not mine really, but it keeps me busy.' There was a wistfulness in Polly's voice which shook Olive. She should keep her talking, ask her for a good cry over a nice cup of tea, even join her blasted committee; but Elizabeth was rubbing the cat up the wrong way and the cat was after the chicken, and Alan would be here. She really had meant to scythe that grass today, as if Alan would notice his stepmother's grass.

'I'll have to go. There's someone at the door. See you soon. Very soon.'

Why can't I be more female? I am leading an utterly, passive existence, the kind of life I used to regard with wondering horror yet accept now and welcome. And yet I absolutely refuse to discuss the shortcomings of Polly's reproductive system. Only with Dulcie Connor was I ever able to join the female conspiracy and then because she didn't care if I joined or not. Long, gossipy afternoons lining our stomachs with tannin and reaching no conclusions. Polly would be content with less yet I reject her.

Fretting mildly after her lack of charity Olive made up her mind to ask Polly over very soon. Meanwhile she would have a bath, wash her hair and do something with that chicken. Salad for lunch, bath, hair, no time to dry it, never mind. Her only decent dress was stained with Elizabeth's blackcurrant juice. Blouses needed ironing. She put on an old skirt and a shirt of Bob's. The effect, combined with the loose, wet hair, was odd.

Her own disorder made her think of Catherine who was always so beautifully dressed nowadays, like a child sent out to a party. Olive had always hoped that a man of intelligence and sensibility would see Catherine's possibilities. Sam Davies had, so why was Olive worried? Olive was not worried. No time anyway.

Wrench the chicken apart because if you ask for it jointed you get the bits left over after some wretched bird collapsed with angina Lucky to get a chicken at all. Fry it in oil, add mushrooms, herbs and stock. I make so many casseroles because they are cheap and cheerful and there is something *abundant* about them, don't you think, life force and all that? I don't know, Catherine would reply, Sam does the shopping. Polly does expensive things to cutlets with paper frills. One was supposed to like cooking and so for years it was a matter of principle to Olive to serve the starkest food she could lay her hands on. Not that anyone noticed and not that you had any choice in those days. People did actually starve to death in London, there were rumours of cannibalism in Berlin, but that was a long time ago.

'Man.'

'No, chicken. Look, you see I'll put it in the oven and then it will be done.'

'Dead.'

'Yes, of course it had to be killed before we could eat it. We have to eat the animals and birds, you see, to live ourselves.' What a gospel to preach to a child. When I asked the same question my mother said that God put the beasts there for us to eat. Not so easy for us to reply. Does this mean if you are an agnostic you should become a vegetarian? The implications of disbelief were embarrassing. When a guinea-pig died Olive spent hours trying to explain that no one actually knew and anyway it didn't hurt any more. In a minute she would have been talking about blessed release after long suffering but Bob came in, assessed the situation and gave Elizabeth her bath. Elizabeth came back and told Olive that the guinea-pig was nowhere now, it didn't need its body any more so they could bury it.

'Man.'

Elizabeth was right. Expecting Alan, Olive turned, smiling, and failed to recognise, thought for one hallucinatory moment that the boy had become an old man.

'Willi. Willi Broda?' He questioned his own name.

'I'm terribly sorry ... I ...' Olive pushed back her damp hair. She must have left the front door open. Although she had never seen the man before there was a mark, a stamp, which was familiar.

'I rang the bell ...'

'Oh, that's broken.'

'Mr. Rawston sent me. He said you might have a room.'

'I'm very sorry, I'm afraid there's a mistake.' She had apologised twice. Now she explained, it was a small house, there was very little room, she had told Dennis. Willi nodded. He even smiled. He seemed unsurprised. Oh, you Jews, why don't you shout? Because you have the measure of our squeamish conscience or because shouting never got you anywhere before? You simply exist, you are there, an unalterable fact.

Willi confused Olive, put her day, her life out of joint, so that she was younger and half recovered time she thought she had laid away for ever when she was a girl in a rage about so many things. You'll burn up, Bob used to say, you'll burn yourself out, you can't live through other people, through these horrors. The day peace broke out Olive had actually spoken of walking to Hiroshima.

That would have been about the time Polly started collecting

those pictures of atrocities from all over Europe. She had a contact in Japan. It was her rôle in the group and she carried it out with stolid efficiency, sorting, captioning, filing, building up what must have been by the end a charnel house of horrors, if anyone cared to look. Olive thought, she must ask Polly one day what had become of her collection. No one would be interested now anyway, they had supped full and were sated, which was only natural. They could not take in the scale, the immensity of the things that had been done.

Yet it was impossible to see this thin old man with the watery eyes, the veins standing up from transparent hands, simply as a potential lodger or even as a person she was free to like or dislike. Least of all could Olive regard him with indifference. His very existence pricked old guilts and concerns so that with part of her mind she was relating him all the time to those pictures and statistics. This made him not more but less real, like a film star encountered in the flesh.

They sat out of doors drinking coffee, watching Elizabeth as people turn to a fire when there is something awkward in the air.

Willi spoke. 'A good garden.'

Ripe, Olive had been thinking as she looked up at the gilded apple tree, ripe, the wilderness pushed back a little each day, each week, chaos absorbed, domesticated. Push the walls higher, fill the garden with fruit and children. And where are *you* in all this, said with a small sarcastic voice inside herself. Well, here, of course, in my garden.

'It's rather a mess, I'm afraid. You have a nice garden at the Home?'

It was a bleak, awkward question, but Willi answered with polite seriousness, a touch of dryness: 'Too many tulips.'

'Do you hate tulips? So do I.' They laughed. It was a little easier. Olive found herself telling him about their plans for the garden. This led into their projects for the house. By now it was obvious he would stay, for a while at least until they could find him somewhere permanent. This should not be difficult. Meanwhile they could fix up the attic. She showed him. He moved lightly through the house, hardly disturbing the air.

'Come up for a beer?' Bob's brother, Jack, had moved when they bought the business and lived now with his wife, daughter

and poodle over the garage. Wall to wall, dinette, kitchenette, and television which Mavis watched with the wondering eyes of a child, doing her nails. Jack had made his pile in the war, fiddling in supplies. His life fitted him. Out of long habit, from the struggling days, he washed his hands before he went upstairs.

Mavis was walking the dog. The brothers drank. Bob should get back, Alan might be home. He accepted a whisky. The Korean affair had dented the car business, but Jack would ride this trouble. The brothers never had much to say to each other, though there was tenderness between them. Jack respected Bob's intelligence, his integrity, and he knew he would not keep him. Bob wondered about his brother's life. He had thought of him once as the only free man he knew, because Jack believed in nothing.

'Alan's back isn't he?'

'Today or tomorrow.'

'What does Olive think of that?'

'She doesn't mind.'

'She's all right.'

Bob nodded and said what he had come to say. 'I'm not sure I can stay on with you.'

'You mean that?'

'I don't know.'

'Mavis said you'd go.'

'What made her say that?'

'You know. Women.' They were both a bit drunk now, they might speak. Jack would never be possessed by tongues but he saw his brother as something different, extraordinary. Mavis resented this. It puzzled Jack. 'But she's right. You want something else and if you want to go, you go, but what?'

Bob shrugged. 'If I knew that I'd be rich. I'm grateful, you know.'

'Stuff that.'

Bob walked to the window. Mavis would be back. Jack was getting a soft, round stomach. Freedom, was it really to be had by leaving? He had broken with the Party but he was still not free of it, of old ways of thinking which persuaded him once that politics, communist politics in particular, were the only way to change. In his commitment to politics there had been a kind of freedom but one which had ceased in the end to satisfy;

had finally repelled him. Free of the violence which was increasingly implicit in communism, he had found himself impotent in Gaza. He would not put it so theatrically, himself. He would say simply that he had failed to discover a substitute for action. As for private life, all he had kept intact from the violent marriage to Moira had been a vision of how it should be possible for a man and a woman to live together. A miracle, now he came to think of it, that he had salvaged so much. The war had helped there, and politics, and a certain coldness he had used instinctively over that period. Had it become rooted in him? He thought not, but wondered if it was reaction against his first marriage which made him so ambitious for this one, if he was expecting Olive to respond to a vision he treasured in his own mind but could not communicate. There were times when he felt that every possession they accumulated, their house, their friends, even, in some mad way, their food and their bodies, came between them and reduced his vision. Dry with himself, he saw the absurdity of his complaint. He was in the wrong job, that was all.

He looked over the roof-tops at the sky, which was pale and wide tonight, suggesting a landscape other than that of the city, flat land like Essex where his grandfather had lived what would now be romantically described as an elemental life. A bit of a farm, a few scratchy hens, fishing, a pub in the end where three roads met only just breasting the flats. You could see it from miles away and the few people who patronised it creeping along the three roads to the pub, bodies crippled, so it looked, before the everlasting wind. There was always a door banging, a wall to be tarred against the salt gale which tore in and thrilled the boy. Society and politics meant nothing there. The grandfather had been a small man, but handsome and strong. Towards the end he got mean, mad, angry with his own life.

'Penny for them?'

Bob smiled. 'I was thinking of the old man.' Their father, from whom Bob got his city nature and his political instincts, had been Dad; the grandfather was always the old man.

'More than he did for us.'

'You ever been back?'

'What for?'

Bob nodded. 'You might be right.'

'He's gone to bed.'

'How did he seem?'

Olive pondered, brushing her hair. 'The same. Older, I suppose.'

'I should have been here.' Bob sat down on the bed to take off his tie and shoes. He had stayed on drinking with Jack and nothing had been settled or changed. Meanwhile his son had come home. He felt infinitely weary and laid his face against her hand. Perhaps regardless of everything there was the marriage which survived and grew and absorbed all the mysteries it was required to digest. Did it matter so much if this was comfort? He had never imagined himself beyond consolation.

Olive said something about a Jew and a cat. He was too tired to examine the implications. He found a card in his dressing-gown pocket.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'I meant to show you.'

Something about North Korea and imperialist aggression. Messages from another world, from another time when the issues were simple. Possibly even that had been an illusion. Dreams maimed now and hidden, yet you survived, you aspired ridiculously, you went on. You slept and then you woke in the morning, absurdly hopeful, as if it really were possible to begin again.

4

ALAN woke early, a habit from the last couple of years. He heard Willi stirring in the little room under the roof, putting his kettle on the ring, opening the window, flip flop across the floor, then silence.

Mornings were best. He sat on for hours with Olive at the breakfast table. He was surprised to find how much he enjoyed domesticity. About mid-day he went down to the Labour Exchange. In the afternoons he walked Elizabeth. Evenings he did repair jobs in the local radio shop. There might be something permanent there. He wasn't sure he wanted it yet.

'Something will turn up,' Olive said. 'I'll miss you when it does.' She was sitting at the table, slicing beans. Polly and Edward were coming for dinner. It was now August. Willi had been with them for two months, a barely perceptible presence in the attic. Yet in Olive's mind in a way he dominated the house. She never felt easy with him and wore herself out not resenting the time Bob spent talking to the old man—who was not an old man at all, but forty or fifty. She felt guilty because she knew she was keeping him in the house for so many wrong reasons: to assuage queasy humanitarian pangs no more admirable than seasickness; to make it impossible for her mother to move in; to assure herself that her happiness was strong enough to take on all comers. Less rational was her feeling that his arrival opened cracks in her house. Nothing had actually happened. Alan had come home, and that was one problem. Bob worked no harder than usual but was exhausted. The cards which continued to come, almost daily now, were a minor irritation but an obsessive mystery. There was something the matter with the cat. Dazzled by its new life of luxury it had eaten too much (Olive said to Bob, but I thought they knew instinctively how much to eat?) and now hardly ate at all. The hoops of its ribs stood out and its eyes were gummy. It was important to remember that these were

all minor problems and unconnected.

Alan did not know what he wanted to do. He was slighter than his father and dark, but with Bob's quick smile. Years ago, before Bob was between them, he had talked to her shyly, stiffly, out of a tower of loneliness in his father's house where he tended his radios, alone in a top room listening passionately to messages from all over the world. He was older now, easier and more secret.

She questioned him lightly about the army, hoping he might give away some key to his present mood. He answered her but his tone too was light. He was a wireless engineer so they had made him a medical orderly. This was typical, he said, apparently without bitterness. He could by now have been a fully fledged wireless operator. As it was, they had sent him out half qualified as a killer and a nurse. He gave her a graphic description of the once-a-week occasion when the medics were dragged out and made to play soldiers. Oddly enough, he'd quite enjoyed that part, since they were exercising with blanks and dummies and their only fatality had been a goat, which was half-starved anyway and dying. Oh yes, there had been one or two scares—a radio hut was blown up, a supply lorry ambushed, a skirmish twenty miles away, but nothing closer. The greatest perils were boredom and Sergeant Piper. Sometime, in another life, you wouldn't mind dealing with Piper, but meanwhile you got cunning at keeping out of his way and you turned in on yourself and tried to live there. 'It wasn't so bad.'

Olive guessed he had seen things of which he was not yet prepared to speak, of which he might never speak. Always in their morning conversations they reached this area of embarrassment. Then there was Elizabeth to divert them. Alan seemed happiest playing with Elizabeth: with her alone he ceased to be watchful. Before his father he hardly spoke. With Olive he was friendly but reserved.

This morning he seemed more relaxed than usual. He took a piece of white wrapping paper left over from the meat and drew the cat for Elizabeth. He made it look mad and murderous, a killer cat. It was a good drawing. Elizabeth liked it and he was pleased. Olive took a risk.

'You remember how we used to talk? You said you'd like to go all over the world, building bridges? You couldn't do with politics at all.'

'Still can't.'

'And the rest?'

'Oh, I used to have some grand ideas. Still have I suppose.'

'You hated England then.'

He nodded and she thought he would say no more, but he added with sudden vehemence: 'It's even worse now. It goes on and it gets worse.'

'That sounds bad.'

'It is bad.'

'So what do you do? You don't like politics, you don't like war.'

He smiled, his sudden, irradiating smile, more brilliant than Bob's now she came to see.

'He feels the same, you know. You've more in common than you think.'

'We've nothing in common. We never had.' He added, as if there were some connection in his mind: 'I met a chap on the boat who was going to Korea. He gave me some good advice.'

What the advice was, Olive never heard. But the conversation was taken up again through the days and weeks. What emerged was inconclusive. She remembered him as he was a few years ago, as she had once been, in a rage of desire for the unattainable. There was still the feeling of unharnessed energy about him, but now that he was better equipped to speak he was restrained by the recognition that his longings were inexpressible. Or perhaps he simply could not talk to her: the ten years between their ages represented a gulf not only in experience but in acquiescence. Knowing nothing of her doubts he would see her as his father's wife, a woman who was happy and must therefore have accepted the world as it was. The pitiless logic of the young, that hadn't changed at least. He could not comprehend and she could not explain that you contain at any time the whole of your life. The past remains folded in with the present and the future too is there, if only you could see it. On one level her mother was a nuisance. On another she revealed, as she grew older, everything she had ever been. When she was dead, Olive guessed, no longer a responsibility or a weight upon her own life, Mrs. Armitage would grow younger and Olive would recognise with a charity she had never felt for her alive, the handsome, intelligent girl and the frightened child who inhabited the old woman.

But Alan was twenty so as things were, in times that were bad without either horror or hope, grotesquely comfortable for anyone with enough to eat in England, in these times he took the job in the radio shop and at evening classes provided generously by virtue of the state, learned Russian and French. He had a gift for languages and he worked hard, equipping himself. But for what?

Polly announced that there was nothing so different about the young. Hadn't we all felt like that at one time or another? One got over it. She spoke a little too loudly, emphatically. Olive prayed that Alan, whom they were discussing, was out of the house. It had been a hot day and she had hoped they might take coffee out of doors but the air had thickened all evening and now the rain fell in heavy, wide-spaced drops. August rain is like a punishment. The whole scene, come to think of it, resembled a gathering of penitents: scrubbed pine table, white candles, Bob in a black sweater, Edward Carter, Polly's husband, in a charcoal suit, Polly herself magnificently corseted into a black dress with a cowl collar.

Edward stroked his small moustache. He was a rich, shy man, a publisher. Olive liked him very much but wondered sometimes who he was. She had met him once in the street and failed to recognise him, but she did not for this reason dismiss him. She thought his moustache would be very soft.

Bob was watching Polly with his most generous and dangerous expression. Olive dared not catch his eye. The continuing dialogue of marriage -of this marriage, at least, something new to Olive, the discovery that the best part of the evening was the last drink when the rest had gone and you could talk about them. She had not had this with Dennis, her first husband. Polly and Edward did not have this, she felt sure.

Why so sure? What does one know of anyone else's marriage? The greatest mystery of all, the relationship between two people. She had read somewhere in some novel that the best, that is the most successful marriages were founded on gullibility. This had seemed rubbish to her at the time. She would say now that this was one kind of marriage, the mutual hoodwinking with the assent of both partners. She had married Bob, of course, for quite different reasons. He understood her and knew when to challenge her and when to let her off. Yet even that was too

simple. The reasons for which you marry are not the reasons for which you stay married: needs change, aspirations cease to match, areas of discretion can so easily become gulfs of misunderstanding.

He did look tired. She wondered why she could not say to him: you're tired, you should rest.

Bob waited while Polly took a small cigarette from a thin gold case. He lit it for her. He fetched her an ashtray. Then he said: 'But why should one get over it?'

'Because life is impossible on these terms.' Polly appeared to relent, but there were two high, bright spots of colour on her cheeks. 'Of course it depends what you want.'

Olive filled Edward's coffee cup. Edward gave Olive a cigarette. He did not smoke himself but he carried cigarettes. He also carried a lighter, which was more remarkable. Olive offered Edward some of his own brandy, Polly had given them for Christmas. Edward did not drink Edward reminded Olive of the American she had once nearly married, who believed in the attainable. She might have married Edward-Harold. She might have married anyone. No, Edward was not Harold. One never knew about Englishmen. The most conventional were the most privately, weirdly mad. For all she knew, Edward went in for whips, chains, masks, the lot. Beware Englishmen. Olive thought she would have some brandy.

A sign of Bob's tiredness was that he let Polly off. Polly asked about Willi; was he married, had he any children? Yes, but his wife had died. Yes, but they had gone to Israel. Why didn't Willi go to Israel? Because he was a European. Because at fifty he was both too young and too old for Israel, neither a prophet nor a Kibbutznik. The atmosphere would change, but that would be too late for Willi.

There was in Polly's eyes the glint of the committee woman scenting prey. A few years ago she had changed from a large, competent, yearning girl with phenomenal breasts, to a woman of authority.

'Tell him to get in touch with me. I'm sure I could do something for him.' Polly giving orders again. Dulcie Connor used to say she had got bossy. Olive wondered if Polly had simply made herself into this kind of person from some unfathomable despair. Her commands sounded sometimes like cries for help.

Did Bob see this? He answered. 'I don't think he wants any-

thing done for him.'

'Well, what does he do?'

'He has quite a good job, in a bookshop.' Bob did not say that while it was a perfectly respectable and prosperous bookshop, the kind of place Polly herself might have an account, Willi's job was the lowest of the low, wrapping up books in the despatch department. 'He does a little writing himself.'

'What is he writing?'

'A history of the Jews.'

For a moment, this was enough to wind Polly. When she was a girl she used to blush. Now she touched her ring and her brooch and said, Oh well, he was all right, then. But hadn't the Jews rather been done to death? Before she had even finished speaking she realised the enormity of her remark.

Edward saved her. Wasn't it true, he suggested, that nowadays there seemed hardly a subject left that wasn't loaded? Youth, war, the bomb, the Jews. He steadied them.

Olive fetched more coffee. When she came back into the room the atmosphere was charged again. They had got on to freedom.

Bob was drinking too much brandy but he seemed icily sober, insisting that there was only one standard by which to judge politics, history, art, marriage, love of any kind, and that was freedom. 'Parents must free children. The state must free its members. History proved this time and time again. There is a natural instinct, a revolt in people against autocracy. Dictatorship, colonialism, were always self-defeating.' There were images he could not shake off: an Eisenstein film he had seen a week ago, that vision he had had from Jack's window of a wide sky and another lost landscape; a boat he had seen as a child in Essex, running before the wind. There had been something at first noble and marvellous about the men easing the sheets to thump and roll out to sea, then they were pathetic, so much smaller than the forces which drove them on.

'But *surely*.' Polly leaned forward. Her breasts really were magnificent, Olive thought, works of art. Her imagination tickled by the brandy, she had a mad urge to paint Polly's breasts gold, pile them with fruit and flowers, frame them and put them on show. 'But surely,' Polly said to Bob, 'people don't really want that kind of freedom? They can't cope with it?' She was off. 'Take families. It's the fashion now to let children do as they like. But that worries them, they don't want it, they need

rules. It's the same with all of us, up to a point we need to be told, it's the only way we can be happy.'

Bob smiled. He seemed to make a tremendous effort to stir himself from lethargy. He stood, walked to the black window and rested for a moment, his cheek against the cool glass. 'Are you happy? Does happiness matter so much?'

Polly flushed. 'Perhaps not to people like you.'

'And who are people like me?' His tone was still mild.

She was groping, knowing herself defeated, but going down in flames.

'I don't know anything about politics . . .'

'But you know what you don't like.'

'I've never understood communism, if that's what you mean. But I don't see that it can be so disgraceful, to want to be happy. I don't believe in absolute freedom because I simply don't think any of us are up to it any more than we are up to a classless society or rule by the will of the proletariat. The best we can really manage is a roughly democratic way of government and that's what we have. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't It's better than autocracy, I'll give you that. But if communism had come off, if it had been carried right through and we were free to live as Marx or Lenin or whoever said we should, I think that would have been the end, anarchy.'

'Well, what then? Private life? A society based on greed, self interest and the balance of death?'

'Why not?' Her cheeks flared. Bob mused, why not? Why did he hesitate? Why think of chucking in the job? Why not hand in his Party card? To be a private man, was that too much or too little, was that freedom? Polly was still talking. 'Who is free anyway? The need to earn a living, that ties you down for a start. Then family, house, I don't notice you complaining about that. Are *you* free?' Polly seemed to collapse now. She went on, barely audibly: 'Has it ever occurred to you that there are some people whose needs are very simple, who want nothing more than to be tied down, who would give up their freedom gladly for happiness?'

Bob was ashamed of turning on her but was possessed still by the picture of the boat and the soldier's wind. Here in the city there was no wind, no tide. The rain fell down. 'What do you want then,' he asked, 'are you happy?'

Olive stared at her plate. Edward cleared his throat. Polly

looked like someone who has been struck down in a street accident. 'No, damn you, I'm not happy!'

They all seemed to be suffering from shock and it was Olive who pulled herself together first. 'I'll get some more coffee.'

'I'll help you.'

In the kitchen Polly sank down on a chair. She put her hands to her blazing cheeks. 'Oh God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

'There's absolutely nothing to be sorry for. Aspirin?'

Polly nodded. 'I've left my cigarettes in there.'

Olive found a packet on the dresser. 'You never used to smoke.'

'There are a lot of things I never used to do. Putting my foot in it, that hasn't changed at least. I spend so much time telling people what to do I can't stop.'

'I don't see that you said anything frightful.'

'It's not what I say, it's how I say it.' She swallowed the aspirin. 'Of course you know what it was all about.'

'Yes.'

'So I've probably hurt Edward and Bob thinks I'm off my head. I've ruined your lovely dinner because there's only one thing in the world I want and I can't have it. The maternal instinct isn't very fashionable nowadays, is it? It's supposed to be a rotten world to bring children into. People talk about the bomb and I remember those awful pictures we used to collect, and I know they're right but none of it means anything to me. It's as if I were deaf or blind in that respect.'

'Polly ...' Sitting across the kitchen table from Polly, Olive pondered and rejected the traditional responses: you have a marvellous husband, a busy life. The large, burning woman defied comfort. Olive touched Polly's hand and at this Polly finally looked up.

'You know what the worst thing is, Olive? I hate sex, I simply can't stand it. That's rather funny, isn't it, under the circumstances.'

'You mean it's not right with Edward?'

'It would never be right with anyone. What I need is an immaculate conception.' She stubbed out her cigarette. 'Women like Dulcie Connor with all those children. I heard of her the other day, you know.'

'Dulcie?'

'One of the boys was in trouble. One of my committees. She's

in the country somewhere, living like a gypsy. I've got the address.'

'I'd like to have it.'

Polly groped in her bag. She seemed calm now. 'I must look a fright.' She slammed powder on her face. 'I gather the children run wild. I'll never understand women like that.'

Olive strained the coffee in the jug. 'We might go and see her. You and I, I mean.'

Polly was now quite possessed. 'Oh that was a long time ago, wasn't it,' she said. 'I'm not really sure that one can ever go back.'

'I was brutal.'

'Fairly.' Olive washed the plates and stacked them. 'Don't lock the door. Alan's not in.'

'Where does he go?'

'I don't know. Why don't you ask him?'

In bed she lay listening to Willi creak across the floor. Willi couldn't sleep. The house was too small. Willi would have to go. They would need the room. Where was Alan? Was the cat dying? Willi, Alan, Polly, Bob, what ailed them all? Her mother would die, this winter or the next, there were signs. Twenty years from now people would write novels explaining that our unease, our moral poverty, could be attributed to the tides of history. They were already beginning to talk about war children, and living with the bomb, as if war were an epidemic illness and history an indifferent force beyond our control. There might even be some truth in these assumptions. Frustrated by peace, one had withdrawn to private life. In the rotten fifties, it could be proved, that was the only way to live. But that could not be the whole truth, it was too glib, too easy.

Instinctively she rejected the easy conclusion yet she treasured her life. Her nature was divided against itself.

Bob was suffering, she knew that, but he would not speak of it, could not perhaps. He had been lonely for many years and habits of self-reliance were not so quickly broken. His behaviour tonight, so uncharacteristically dogmatic and brutal, was one of the ways in which he betrayed himself. To help him, she would have to reverse a relationship in which the strength had always been on his side. In the past Olive had been famous for her lame dogs, her pig-headedness in defending them. It was an irony

that she could do nothing at all to help her husband. As it happened, she was going to complicate his life still further, but that would keep.

'Alan's in.'

'He makes me nervous.'

'He's all right.'

'I mean. He seems to watch. He doesn't want anything.'

'You don't think he's in trouble?'

'I don't know. He talks to me but I don't know anything about him.'

'You're tired.

'We're never on our own.'

'Sleep.'

When she was curled with her hand flat against her cheek, as if warding off a blow, he slipped out of bed and went downstairs. The rain had stopped. He looked at the racing sky and felt nothing. If his distress were significant, surely there would be signs and omens? He got himself a glass of cold water but did not drink it. That was the pattern of his life nowadays, the glass of cold, refreshing water just out of his reach. He wanted to stay sane for Olive. He would stay sane, he knew that. He was not the kind of man who went mad. All he needed was to accept a rational, happy, normal way of life. He did accept it. He had given up very little for immeasurable riches. So why was he not content? The best description he could find for his state of mind was something quite common which could only be defined as bereavement, a sense of loss.

5

THE Russian class drifted out past the bust of Bertrand Russell. Alan had got into the habit of going on with the others for a drink or egg and chips. He knew none of them well and was happy enough to sit and listen. Since the summer each class had developed its own identity. The actors, who now blocked the door, were arrogant, self-contained, self-absorbed, in love with the current project, with each other, with themselves. The English students were the drones. The architects were the most intense and of the language students the Russian lot were the oddest and most interesting mixture. No one persevered with such an impossible language unless they had a powerful motive. Unless they were so deeply bored that it was better even to learn Russian.

It was a night for beer. Alan shared Sheila's umbrella down the King's Road.

Sheila said. 'I heard Gilbert Murray last night on the wireless.'

'Oh yes?' Alan glanced at Sheila. She had an electric mop of fairish hair and a broad capable face. An unnoticeable girl except in repose when she took on a mild, astonishing, pre-Raphaelite beauty. When vagueness overlaid her features in class Alan had a detached, inexplicable urge to reach out and trace the line from her cheek to her jaw and then to touch her lips. Then, while he was wondering how it would feel, she would come out of her dream and make some pertinent remark indicating that she had not been dreaming at all. Not that he would have touched her anyway. He enjoyed the company of girls but there was a lot he had to settle in his own life before he could think of anything like that. In the few experiences he had had girls expected more than he was prepared to give, or less. He was repelled by the sexual vanity, the boasting and pure viciousness he had been forced to listen to night after night in the army but he found no comfort either in the awkward, groping en-

counters he felt obliged to seek. Sex was either nothing or it was more than this. So he left it alone.

Alan did not admit that he had heard of Gilbert Murray, and that was about all. He might well have known more about him, in fact, since he had read lately almost anything he could get his hands on. He knew his reading lacked direction but this did not trouble him. Hardy, Shaw, Eliot, some thrillers, some historical biography, a bit of *The State and Revolution* (that was hard going), he was drunk with reading and indiscriminate as a tippler. Sometimes he read a whole page without taking in the meaning but the words still communicated to him on a level that was almost physical: they rang in his head, made him gasp, greedy for more.

They were first in the pub. Sheila shook the umbrella, stuck it in the rack and went to sit down. Alan fetched two half pints. 'What did he say, then?'

She took his question seriously. 'Well, it was rather depressing. He said Europe was Greece and America was Rome. His point seemed to be that we hadn't much longer to go.'

There was a puddle of beer on the table. Sheila traced a pattern in it with her finger. 'He sounded like an old man talking in the dark. I didn't want to believe him.' She grinned, her face suddenly open and hopeful, sensible again. 'Actually, I think he was talking rubbish.'

The others came in and everyone but Alan seemed to have heard the broadcast. He was interested in their various attitudes, the certainty with which they laid down their views, flat on the table. Everyone appeared to agree that England was done for and the sooner the better. Alan was astonished to find that he was not the only one who felt like this. It was a heady experience to discover that he was not alone, it was too much to take in at once.

Yet for reasons he could not pin down, even to himself, he still felt isolated. He had not read enough, or he had read too much or something strangled and lonely in him resented the ease of their talk. It was possible even that he had hoped to be alone with Sheila and was disappointed.

Someone began to talk about films and the conversation became less serious. Sheila and three others played darts. Alan was left alone with David Wright, a teacher who was older than most of the class but usually came on with the younger ones for

a drink. Presumably he had a home to go to, but if he was married he never mentioned the fact. Alan had heard something about him being connected with a peace group. From time to time he read or heard of people trying to set up such movements against the bomb or the Korean war but nothing much seemed to come of them.

They talked idly about the army—David Wright had been in the same part of the world as Alan, but in the war—then it turned out that David knew Bob slightly. 'Some friends of mine have been trying to enlist him.'

Alan replied vaguely. He had been at ease with David Wright. Now he was cautious, even suspicious. What was a man of his father's generation doing drinking three times a week with a bunch of kids? He was just about to join the others at the dartboard when David Wright asked him, 'Why are you learning Russian?'

Alan shrugged. 'Something to do.' He relented. 'The literature interests me, I must say, though so far I've only read it in English.' He didn't put forward another motive, one which would have sounded absurdly sentimental: the feeling that if there was to be any point in life on earth at all national barriers must be broken down. He really believed that if people were able to move from one country to another, to converse and be understood in any tongue, then they might at least begin to be free.

'That's not your real reason?'

'I suppose there's no harm in trying to understand what other people are saying.'

'You believe in the essential goodness of human nature?'

'I suppose so.' Alan felt he was being trapped and resisted. 'And I think Chekhov's bloody good.'

'What's all this?' The others were back and began at once to discuss Russian literature. One of the younger men had the Russian text of *Three Sisters*. 'It's so *bourgeois*,' he said, 'just like England today. Everyone stuck in the country and moaning about the weather. Turgenev's just as bad.'

Sheila said, very seriously: 'But that was a decadent society.'

'Exactly!'

She flushed. 'But there must have been—I mean, there was—some point. They believed they were suffering for those who would come after. Look at the end of *Three Sisters*.'

'Vague. The defeated trying to justify their own wretched

little lives. That bit at the end always reads like something tacked on.'

'It's not the same now.' Sheila appealed to David Wright. He smiled and shook his head.

'I must admit, I don't think these times will amount to much. There's a madness around. Decisions seem to be made beyond the sphere of human influence. All we can do is behave as if it were otherwise, as if we could change things.'

Alan had been listening and watching. David Wright confirmed everything he had felt, rationally. Yet such common sense repelled him. It was all talk. That was all he had had since he came back to England. No one acted. They went on and on about the inevitability of the bomb as if this let them off.

Yet David Wright was doing more than Sheila. He was trying to form a peace group.

The situation in Korea had deteriorated. In England it looked as if the Festival might be flooded out. Alan took Sheila home, as it was on his way.

She lived in Oakley Street in a flat full of girls. He took her to the door. Her life was unimaginable to him. Work (she taught at an art school), evening classes of the cinema with friends, home to this house blazing with lights; no questions, no limits. Freedom. 'You're lucky. I'd give anything for a place of my own.'

'It's not what you think.' She followed his gaze upward. The rain poured down her face. She had been quiet ever since the conversation about Russian literature. Perhaps she felt she had made a fool of herself?

'They don't stint on electricity.' He smiled.

'Will you come in?'

'Not tonight.'

She put the key in the door, then paused. 'Were you quarrelling with David Wright? When we came back, I mean.'

'Not exactly. But if you must know, I think he's a hypocrite.' He struggled to explain. 'He sets himself up, but what has he ever done? What is he doing hanging about with us? He reminds me of my father. It's all talk, theory, politics. They all pay lip-service but nothing matters very much. The war was the only thing that ever happened to them and they can't get over it.'

'What did he say to you about the war?'

'The usual stuff—army jokes.'

'He was a prisoner-of-war with the Japanese. Did he tell you that?'

'No.'

She went in and Alan made his way home, conscious of her reproach, and resentful too. If David Wright had declared himself the evening might have gone very differently. Or would it? Alan felt David Wright had been less than honest with him because he had not said, straight off: the Japs got me and pulled out my toenails, or whatever. But if he had spoken like this Alan would have had no answer. David Wright's suffering, the scarred face of the man on the boat, so much that had happened in that war, was unanswerable.

By the time he got home he was soaked to the skin and shivering and no longer convinced that honesty had anything to offer. Everything was relative. One violence cancelled out another. Unless you'd been in it yourself it was hard to get steamed up about the Japs when you thought about Nagasaki. Was there a moral universe, any more? Those Russians they were talking about tonight, they were pathetic but they did at least believe that somewhere, if only in the future, there was a better way to live. If you didn't believe that, there was no point in going on.

But he was twenty, so when he had gone in and shut the door behind him he suddenly remembered Sheila, and wondered if he would see her at the class next week.

'He's back.'

Bob put down his book. He wasn't reading anyway. 'Why do you worry about him so much?'

'He's not happy.' Olive had brought to bed nail varnish, emery board and orange stick, but she had not done her nails. They cracked now as soon as they grew beyond the finger-tip. There were creams that were supposed to stop this, calcium pills: she wore rubber gloves at the sink, but they still cracked. Her complexion, on the other hand, had noticeably improved. Lately she wanted to make love. Or rather, she wanted sex, with anyone, all the time. She regarded herself as she would a bitch on heat, with wry pity, felt as she walked smiling down the street, that she wailed aloud. It was the most powerful sensual urge she had felt since she first met Bob.

When she was still married to Dennis Rawston and sleeping with Bob in any corners they could find, each admitted to the other that desire caught them out at the most awkward moments in the course of an ordinary working day; by the time they met the physical drive had often been dissipated by weariness and the necessity for secrecy, so there were many occasions when they simply talked. While Bob was shrewd and at times ruthless, he had never been furtive. And unlike most women, Olive was not a natural conspirator.

Olive had made the best of it all the same. They had found a cellar, miraculously intact on a bomb site, and when she looked back now those seemed some of the best times they had had. They were not, she knew that when she was honest with herself.

If their sexual life had settled down, that was natural. Like every other aspect of a happy marriage, it had its seasons.

'You remember the cellar?' she asked.

'Thank God that's done with. What made you think of it?'

'You never wanted to make love there.'

'Many animals can't copulate behind bars.'

Olive turned out the light. 'So it was a prison to you?'

'Didn't you feel that?'

'I was happy there.' She moved towards him.

'Well,' he said, surprised, but responded.

Olive felt she was abusing him. He was so tired he slept for a moment like a man resting halfway up a hill. She spoke against his shoulder. 'I'm pregnant.'

He had not heard this. Willi shuffled, flip flop across the ceiling.

'Come in me.'

She drew him in and held for as long as she could. It was violent but curiously unfinished. Bob slept at once but Olive lay awake, thinking of Alan, wondering if Elizabeth was getting a cold, listening to her house.

6

Of course, it could not have rained all winter. There must have been days when the sun shone and Olive walked Elizabeth in the park as she had imagined she would do. But when she looked back on that winter it was from behind streaming windows. Anyone entering the house came in from the rain and in the shops and buses there was a sardonic cheerfulness around, heightened by the first serious war scare in the New Year. The chance that the Korean conflict might become cosmic was real enough but to Olive it all seemed part of the weather outside.

There was talk of war, and she joined in, though mostly she listened. Friends of her own generation whom she respected spoke briefly and with disgust. Alan had begun to bring home a few young people from the Institute and while Olive made coffee and sandwiches for them, sometimes a meal, she listened and was puzzled. They seemed so stern, so rational, in a way the young had never felt before, surely? There was the usual high-flown talk to be expected of anyone around twenty, but the undercurrent was oddly cool. Mrs. Armitage, who had been ill on and off through the winter, announced that the young had no values nowadays, that was the cause of all the trouble in the world. By this she meant that she had belonged once to a certain class and was short of money. Olive answered vaguely, ashamed of how little it cost her nowadays to propitiate her mother. She felt herself that Alan and his friends were suffering a paralysis of the will.

She said to Bob: 'They scare me.'

'They're young, that's all. You can't expect them to feel as we did. They don't have the same options or maybe they have too many. Nothing's clear cut. They're working it out. They'll be all right.' He wondered. He too had been listening and was bewildered by the complexity of his reactions. He envied them their energy and felt sad for them. They had the same urge he felt as a youth to link their private and their social existence, this

came through in everything they said, but while he had seen harder times they were frustrated in a way he had never been. At the same age he had hardly had to choose. At twenty, of course he was a communist; by the time he was thirty he had been through a war. Now his life was at its most intense climacteric, but a private one of which he could not speak, and if he had spoken his son and these other young people would not have understood.

They were concerned, as he had been in his time, with action. Less with violence than any generation before, less with morals, not at all with politics; they seemed, at first sight, self-absorbed, wrapped up in private problems and issues that would have seemed trivial in his early, political days. He sensed that beneath they were raging for action, as he had once been; he envied this simple passion and waited to see what direction it would take.

'But they're against everything,' Olive complained in a flash of impatience. 'What are they *for*?'

'Nothing perhaps. Why should they be for anything?'

'We didn't feel like that.' Olive grinned, aware that she was being unreasonable. She opened the door. The cat refused to go out in the rain. The vet said he could find nothing the matter with it. Animals, like humans, could lose the will to live. Olive stood for a moment, sniffing the rain. She knew that Bob was waiting for her to go to bed so that he could go up and talk to Willi. Willi had had flu, which had turned to bronchitis. It was a week before Olive missed him, creeping like a ghost through the house, then Bob said, he didn't seem so well, perhaps she would have a look at him? She did not care to go into the room and when she did she was appalled. How could anyone live with so little in this house and how could she not know? She was angry and competent, returned to the days of good old Olive, all the more solicitous with blankets and heaters and company since she alone knew that he would have to go.

She flung the cat out into the rain and it ranged around the yard on high legs. When she was overcome by pity and picked it up, it scratched her. 'I'm tired,' she said to Bob, 'so tired.'

'Go to bed.'

'Alan's forgotten his key.'

'I'll wait up for him.'

'What about Willi?'

'He's asleep. I looked in earlier.'

Olive nodded. She was already in her dressing-gown and now she filled a hot water bottle. Waiting for the kettle to boil she stood with her fists pressed into the small of her back. She remembered how exhausting her first pregnancy had been, how she had resented her body's thickening, the limitations on her energy. She was taking this one easily, almost welcomed the heaviness as if it gave her a substance she had lacked. She had put on too much weight, she knew, she had only been to the doctor a couple of times in the seven months, she developed a ravenous appetite; if anything troubled her, it was the oddly persistent need for sex. This struck her as bizarre and there was no way she could find out if such instincts were normal. There were friends she could have asked, but this kind of confidence was not in her nature. The female confessional had always repelled her so, as though she were two people: Olive who was happy and serenely pregnant put up in silence with Olive the mad bitch sister.

At the door she paused, warming herself against the bottle. Bob was reading the paper. He looked up and smiled, questioning. Olive could not formulate her vague concern, or her optimism—her rootless conviction that this time would pass and even if it did not pass, did this matter so much? She had thought a lot lately about Catherine, her step-sister, now pregnant too and happily married. When Catherine had had a breakdown just after the war she had told Olive that the worst feeling had been the absolute conviction, like knowing that black is black and white is white, the certainty that there was no point in anything, that life was utterly futile. As she recovered this passed but she said once, what if people who were supposed to be mad were the only ones who knew the truth? If madness were not the most awful sanity of all?

'I went to the Russian exhibition.' Someone they had known in the old days had put on a small show of modern Russian painting and as it was only just round the corner, Olive had gone. This was the time of anti-Red hysteria and the gallery, at the back of a left-wing bookshop, had a couple of windows broken. Olive felt obliged to spend half an hour there and to buy a roneoed catalogue but it had been an embarrassing experience. She had wanted so much to be impressed but the rain fell down and the pictures were bad. 'They were rather awful. I don't think much of revolutionary art.'

'What did you expect?'

'Something marvellous, I suppose. Well, something better than that, anyway. There were some young people there and they laughed.'

'And that bothered you?'

Olive smiled. 'No, of course not. You know how little politics mean to me. But I did feel sad. Those children would judge everything that had happened since 1917 by those paintings.'

'Political art is always disastrous.'

'That's a political statement in itself. You realise that? Isn't your attitude rather bourgeois?'

'Then I'm bourgeois.'

He was so drawn she was ashamed of having mocked him and sat down taking his hand across the table. 'I'm sorry.'

Olive looked in on Willi. He was awake, sitting up and writing. When Olive came in he laid the work aside and she saw that there was a pile of similar papers on the chair by his bed. This must be his fabled history of the Jews. On the few occasions she had entered the room when he was out she had wondered if she might come across it, telling herself that, of course, she was not searching and even if she were to find it she would not read it. In any case she rarely had a reason to visit this room. Willi did his own cleaning and once a week took in the sheets she left outside the door and put out the dirty ones.

Up here under the roof the clattering rain insisted. Downstairs it was simply something one woke to and went to sleep to, to be endured in the streets and forgotten once you closed the door behind you. Here, with the noise, like small stones being thrown at the roof, the rattling window, the drip in the corner, the rain was elemental. It was the climate in which you lived.

'How are you? Is there anything you need?'

'I shall get up tomorrow.'

'Oh, do you think . . .? Well, of course, you know best.' Willi had been a doctor in his former life. He had foretold precisely the course of his illness and it had gone as he said.

'Please sit down. Move the papers, put them anywhere.'

As she picked them up Olive saw that they were in a language she did not recognise, Polish she imagined. She sat down.

It was important to recognise Willi as a person in his own right. He was an individual to be liked or disliked. He was not

the history of his race. 'Why don't you go back to medicine?'

'Because I am not qualified.'

'But you must be! You were a doctor.'

'I am not qualified in this country. At my age . . .'

'Of course. I understand. It seems absurd.'

He dipped his head in ironic agreement, eyes veiled. His attitude, which would once have stung her to action, embarrassed her. You sit down to have a perfectly normal conversation and within two minutes you are reminded that this is a Jew.

'How is it going?' Olive indicated the stack of papers.

'Quite well. Your husband is a help. I take him from you?'

'Nonsense.'

He looked up slyly. 'You don't approve.' His throat was corded like an old man's. There was a smell in this room of mushrooms though it was almost bare and immaculately clean. Before it could be turned into a nursery it would have to be scrubbed out with soda and painted. She would talk to Polly and see if something could be done to get round the B.M.A. regulations. She would tell Dennis that he must find somewhere else for Willi to live. The arrangement had only been temporary . . . She was so tired. It was Bob, wasn't it, who had said you cannot live through the suffering of others; happiness had made her pitiless.

'No, I don't approve. The only chance for the Jews is to put their history behind them. It's as if someone had been ill for a long time and the moment came when to be cured they had to look only forward, to make an effort of will. As far as I can gather, that's what the young have done in Israel.' She smiled weakly. 'I'm sorry. I'm being impertinent. I have no right. I . . .' She moved her head against the back of the chair, from side to side, easing the clenched knot of muscle at the top of her spine. 'I'm just rather tired.'

His nod was courteous but faintly sardonic. 'You don't suppose,' he suggested, as if this were the most abstract debate, 'that before we can, as you say, look forward, we must recognise our history? It is like the development of the individual?'

'Why do you always say "we"? That's one of the things I mean. This country has no reason to be proud of its behaviour in the past, but at least we're ready enough to accept you. Then you remind us. You won't let us forget.'

'Oddly enough, my children agree with you. They say I

should go to Israel.'

'Why don't you?'

His irony now was for himself. He shrugged. 'That sun. Those young women with their brown legs, that energy. Such an effort to be reborn. Besides, I do not care for oranges.'

Olive laughed. She found it uncomfortable to sit for too long. She walked to the window. The lights in the street were liquid. Under a lamp she saw a figure pause and look up at the house. Alan, perhaps. He had given up his job at the radio shop and was working on the Festival site. Such an effort to be reborn. She felt the child move. 'This rain,' she murmured, then more briskly, 'why don't you pull your curtains?'

'I like the dawn.'

'In London? In this weather?'

'Around daybreak the rain always stops for an hour or two. We have some fine sunrises up here. Not that we can see the sun, of course, but there is the reflection in the sky above those chimneys. You have never noticed? There are the dark rain clouds and underneath a little patch of blue and then a thick bar of gold almost too brilliant to watch.'

A thought came without warning into Olive's mind: I would like to get away from here. Then almost at once she thought, but it would be the same anywhere. Willi knew this, she guessed, this was his real reason for refusing to go to Israel. She had endured nothing, Willi had been through everything, she did not even like him very much, but they had between them this understanding, that whatever was going on it would be the same in Israel or anywhere else.

The figure beneath the lamp was Alan. There was a girl with him. They were not embracing but talking earnestly. Both wore duffel coats. Neither seemed aware of the rain although they must be soaked.

Bob had come to bed after all. He rubbed Olive's back. He told her that it was Tim Connor who had written those post-cards. Tim, who had always been more of an anarchist than a Communist, was in trouble for some spectacular piece of mad-ness. An Irishman of Australian birth, he had served in the R.A.F. and worked after the war as nightwatchman in one of the ministries. He had concocted home-made bombs and pinched every secret he could lay his hands on and was sacked

finally for sleeping on duty. Now he was had up for a one-man invasion of the Admiralty Cipher Room. He had been found there in the middle of the night drinking hot rum from a Thermos and singing his head off. A psychiatrist had given evidence and Tim was to be committed to a mental hospital.

'We must go and see Dulcie. There must be something we can do.'

'Nothing. I've seen Dulcie. I've spent the last twenty-four hours talking to everyone. There's nothing we can do.'

'I don't accept that.'

Her life fell away. So much of it had been spent in that house with Dulcie and Tim, though it was only a matter of a couple of years. How can anyone bear to live? Dulcie had said.

'How do you think you can help,' Bob asked, 'have them all here?' A few years ago he would not have asked such a question. No effort would have been too great. Now, having done his best and failed, he had put the problem aside. Already his thoughts were turning inward again and Olive understood that though Bob was always available to her, as tender and concerned as ever, she knew very little of what he was thinking. He claimed, for instance, that he wanted the child, was attentive to make her life easier in small ways, but he rarely spoke of it.

'Of course not.'

So he was right, so that part of her life was finished.

'Shall we go to the Russian exhibition tomorrow then? It's Saturday. They're open till five.'

'Fine.' Alan nodded.

Sheila said: 'Come for tea and we can go on from there. If you'd like to.'

'Yes. Thanks. I'd like that. Perhaps we could go somewhere afterwards. I've got to meet David Wright at six for a drink, but that won't take long.'

'I thought you didn't approve of him?'

'He's all right.'

'What is he up to?'

'Nothing, so far as I know.'

'You're scratchy.'

'Sorry.' Alan smiled. Under the lamp he saw that Sheila's duffel hood had slipped back and her hair, darkened by the rain, was plastered to her face. What was it about her? Warmth?

Courage? Honesty? Brightness was the word that came into his mind: not just the electric gold of her hair, not even physical beauty which in the strict sense she did not have, but a sort of glory that he resented sharing with anyone else. Maybe he'd been reading too much, he thought, sardonic with himself, but then he reached out and pulled her hood down over her hair. While he did this she stayed quite still, gravely smiling. 'You'll catch your death.' His hands were shaking.

Alan was still confused and excited by the evening he had spent with Sheila. They had met at the class as usual, to find it was cancelled. The coffee bar was shut so for the first time Alan had gone up to her flat. Her friends were out but, in any case, she said, she used her bedroom as a sitting room.

'You've done it well,' he said, and she had. Looking around, this struck him as all anyone could want in the world—a place of your own. The bed, the lamp, the table, the chair, the lock on the door, seemed to him infinitely desirable objects.

Sheila took off her coat and plugged in an electric kettle. 'Surely you've got your own room?'

'Yes, but it's not the same thing.' He grinned. 'Have to put up with it though, I can't afford anything else.'

'You could if you got a proper job.'

'That seems to be the general opinion.'

'Who else has said that?' Sheila reached down two blue mugs and measured out the coffee.

'My father hasn't said which means more than anything he could say. It's queer, you know, I used to feel that even as a child: if he felt I'd gone wrong in some way or there was some decision he thought I ought to take, he'd bust himself saying nothing. Just as if he was scared of influencing me. It might have been something to do with the way things were between my parents, though I can't quite see the connection.'

'They didn't get on?'

'Like cats and dogs.'

Sheila turned to him, the kettle in her hand. 'I'm sorry. And I wasn't getting at you, you know, about the job.'

They drank their coffee, Alan sitting on the narrow divan, Sheila in the one small easy chair. It was the first time he had been truly alone with her and he was astonished by how conscious he was of the fact. She seemed quite at ease, from which he concluded that she had no special feeling for him, apart from

casual friendship. She was not the kind of girl to dissemble, and that was one of the qualities he most prized in her.

He looked round the room for clues. A family photograph, records, mostly light, though some good jazz, a few library books by the bed and her Russian primer. They discussed the others in the class but that was soon exhausted. He asked if he could put on a Brubeck and they listened to the record. Sheila said lightly that music didn't mean much to her, it was one of her blind spots. He wondered if he should be going. 'What about art? You must go to a lot of galleries?'

'Why should you think that?'

'Well, it's your subject, isn't it?'

'Yes, and I know some very religious people who can't stand churches.'

'Have you any of your own paintings?'

'Well, yes.' For the first time she seemed less sure of herself.

'I'd like to see them.'

She brought over a large portfolio tied with grey tape. 'It's only private stuff really.' But she sat on the edge of the bed while he leafed through them He could see that there were all kinds of things wrong with them but he was shaken by the way in which the sketches and paintings seemed so much a product of her nature as he saw it: an affirmation of Life. He paused, smiling, over one, a childlike representation in crude colours of a couple walking across a field. The picture was packed with animals, birds, flowers.

He drew her down beside him and kissed her. They lay like that without moving He wondered how far he could go and didn't really care very much at that moment whether they went anywhere at all. With his hand on her breast they talked quietly, whispering, because now there were feet on the stairs and people moving about the house. Sheila said, 'I don't want them to know I'm in.' First Alan's pleasure at the picture and then that one physical gesture had simply dissolved the reserve between them. There was no rush of confidence, because this did not seem necessary, but Sheila told him of her family, of whom she appeared fond, and described the people she worked with, her students, and the girls in the flat. Her portraits were vivid. sharp and humorous. 'You like people, don't you?' 'Well, there's nothing else is there? That's really all that matters in the end?' Then she went on, why hadn't he kissed her before, she

had wanted him to so much, why did he seem to hold off from people? He didn't know really. As a boy he'd been full of all kinds of grand ideas he couldn't put into words, then in the army he'd got on well enough with the others but there was no one he ever wanted to see again. In different circumstances he might have made a few friends. The people he had really wanted to know were the Malayans but that was hopeless. Every rule in the army seemed made up to keep you from learning anything of the place or the people. As for Sheila, he didn't know anything about her either, did he? For all he knew she had a couple of lovers under the bed. 'You're so beautiful.' 'I'm five years older than you and I have ghastly hair and a sensible face.' Yes, she had slept with someone once, but that was a long time ago when she first came to London. She had never expected to be a painter herself, but she enjoyed teaching, it was the one thing she was good at. She asked for no reciprocal confidence but she seemed to assume that he was not a virgin, which was true, in the technical sense at least. Someone had put on a record upstairs. Below, a door slammed. 'I'm afraid you can't stay tonight. But they go away tomorrow for the weekend.'

Upstairs a party was setting in. They drew apart, embarrassed, not meeting each other's eyes. Sheila rearranged her clothing and Alan put on his coat. They agreed that they would visit the Russian exhibition though neither had the slightest desire to go.

'Goodnight then.'

'I'll walk back with you.'

'It's pouring.'

'I like walking in the rain.'

'I forgot to tell you, Polly thinks she's pregnant.'

'Good for Polly.'

Olive climbed into bed She said to Bob: 'It was you who prescribed babies for her.'

'It was you who said only happy women should have babies.'

'I've changed my mind. Polly's a special case.'

'Which doesn't mean you have to take her on'

'Don't worry, no lame dogs.' She yawned. 'I seem to have been so tired all this winter. Not unhappy, just tired It must be the rain. You know, I want this baby so much but I feel at the

moment I just won't have the energy to give birth. Of course, I won't have any say in the matter. Don't you think everyone seems tired nowadays, even the young? I was talking to Willi tonight, I think I was rather brutal. I wish I liked him better. He seems to be saying Nevermore, like the raven.

'But I hope it's all right for Polly.'

'Se you tomorrow, then?'

Sheila nodded. 'About four?' She looked up at the house at Willi's room. 'There's a light.'

'Willi never sleeps.'

'Someone's watching us.'

Now Alan too glanced up, but at that moment whoever it was turned back into the room. 'Get under the tree, there's some shelter there.' He did not want to leave her and he sensed that she did not wish to come into the house. Under the tree there was a patch of dryness just large enough for them to stand side by side. And from the tree you could not be seen from the house. The tree was leafless at this time of year but its branches were dense and intricate so someone could walk quite close without seeing you. If you looked up you were dazzled by the streaming lamps. Alan found himself wishing it would snow.

Sheila said: 'It's so quiet here.'

'No traffic. It's a cul-de-sac.'

'I like this part of London. Chelsea's so predictable. You feel here, anything could happen. There's always someone walking about, even in the middle of the night. People stroll around as if it were a summer afternoon. I suppose I'd better go now.'

'Take care.'

'There's a funny smell though. It must be the weather. Have you noticed how this rain gets into everything?'

7

In February Polly and Edward moved up to London. It would be better, Polly said, for schools, and meanwhile it was only sensible to be nearer her doctor. Olive smiled but did not say, wasn't it rather soon to be thinking of schools? Polly was, at the most, two months pregnant.

The three women, Olive, Polly and Catherine, were sewing in the small front room by candlelight and oil lamps—there had been a power cut. Olive was cutting down some curtains of Polly's from her old house: when she moved Polly had given away or sold almost everything, she wanted to start fresh, she said. Catherine, hopeless at needlework, had been struggling with one nightgown for her own layette for six months. At the eleventh hour she would, of course, get everything from Harrods. Polly's task was a piece of gros-point for one of her committees, which held an auction once a year for charity.

Olive ran her hand over the flame coloured velvet. It was so rich, so beautiful, it would make the rest of the room look shabby. 'Why don't we always use oil, it's so much softer?'

'Bad for the eyes.' Polly was right, of course, but looking around the room at the milky globes of the lamps, the fall of velvet which spilled from her lap on to the floor, the small fire, Elizabeth playing quietly with a doll, Olive was possessed as she had been in the spring by images of ripeness. I never thought I'd get soft about pregnant women, she reflected, but Catherine is beautiful. She used to think herself plain, she is still hardly aware that the beauty which was always implicit in her body has reached her face. I'm thirty, having my second child, and I shan't get away with this one so easily. If I want my figure back, I'll have to work for it, and I could never be bothered, I shall be marked for good. The signs are there already. Oh well, ripeness is all, they say.

Last night she had studied her naked body before the bathroom mirror, quite objectively, clinically noting how this time

the muscles in her belly had slackened, there was a knot of veins on her thighs and similar clusters on her heavy breasts. She had resented her first pregnancy intensely yet she had emerged from it unscathed; this one she accepted happily although she was well aware that it meant the end of certain vanities. In a strange way she was almost glad that from now on her body would no longer be that of a young woman.

Polly was already attending natural child-birth classes. Catherine's specialist came to see her at home. Sam fixed that. Olive wondered, am I letting myself go? When Polly said how marvellous the classes were Olive laughed. 'I'll yell until they drug me up to the eyeballs.'

Polly was shocked. Olive, repentant, said of course there was nothing to it, women had babies every day. Polly said she wanted to know everything that was happening all the time. She, at least, intended to be conscious at the moment of birth.

When Polly had gone Olive found Catherine crying in the kitchen, with the cat on her lap.

'Does it hurt? I mean, more than you can bear?'

'You forget. Don't worry. I survived, didn't I?'

'Sorry. You're so sensible about all this. I'm not used to it, that's all. It's the waiting that gets me down. Then Polly makes me ashamed. There are times when I wish I'd never started the whole thing. Isn't that frightful?'

'On the contrary, it's perfectly natural.'

'You mean you've felt like that?'

'Often.' Olive wondered how much to tell Catherine. 'I tried to get rid of Elizabeth, you know. And it wasn't because my marriage was breaking up, or that wasn't the whole reason. I couldn't stand the thought of being taken over by a lump of flesh inside me I had no feeling for at all. Once she was born it was all right. I think women like Polly are the exception. In a way I feel sorry for her child. It will be her whole life. What does Sam say?'

'He wants it so much you'd think it was the first baby that had ever been born in the world. That's one of the things that get me down I suppose.'

Olive reflected that this was the first time she had ever heard Catherine speak of her husband in a way that could possibly be interpreted as disloyal. Once around the time of their marriage Olive had had a vision of Catherine as a happy child on a lead.

It had troubled her. But then, perhaps, all she meant was that this kind of marriage would never have suited her? She said lightly: 'Oh well, it'll be over soon. This is always the longest time. Men can't help. No one can help.' She was faintly appalled by the heartiness of her reassurance: she was speaking to Catherine as women had spoken to her and as women would always speak to their sisters, assuring them, since they had no option, that everything would be all right, that this was a natural process. In spite of the fact that childbirth, though it rarely killed nowadays in civilised countries, could drive women mad. Was that natural? Was it natural that Dulcie Connor's last child should have a fault in the pituitary gland which meant that he would be a dwarf although he would feel and think and have the same capacity for suffering as anyone else? It was supposed to be natural to forget the pains of labour but Olive had not forgotten, any more than she forgot those dreadful statistics Polly had collected after the war which prophesied quite coolly that the bomb would produce genetic mutations, death in the womb, poison in the milk. From time to time articles appeared explaining the effects of strontium 90, the tolerance level and the degree of acceptability. Polly said of course Stalin was mad, everyone knew that, as though this disposed of the problem; it was known that he was only a figurehead and the people who really had influence in the Soviet Union were well aware that the Americans would soon have a much more powerful nuclear weapon. Then naturally even the Russians would see sense. Olive did not agree with her but she kept her temper, she sympathised with Polly's motives. You lived as you could or you went mad. Which meant, you bought a house and you married and had children.

She had never heard of a woman who refused to have children because of the world situation. She made some tea on the gas stove and took it back to the sitting room. 'Mary Owens came this morning.'

Catherine grinned. 'Why do we always call her Mary Owens?'

'She disapproved. It was rather pathetic really. She's the same, only more so. She resents us because Chris is our brother and we love him. That's her life's work. She glared at my stomach and said she and Chris had decided not to have children. She said women who had children in times like this were

irresponsible. I didn't believe a word of it.'

'Poor Chris.'

'He'd be lost without her. At least he thinks he'd be lost without her and he's believed that for so long it's probably true now. I've tried to see him but he always makes some excuse.'

Catherine nodded. 'So have I. I suppose he never got over prison or perhaps it was the war. He got mixed up in that stupid smuggling business because he couldn't stand how things were after the war.'

'I don't think Chris ever got over being born. He hadn't the courage to kill himself so he married Mary Owens. He sends me dirty seaside postcards sometimes.'

Catherine mused: 'When I was young I used to think he was terribly dashing and lucky. He seemed to have a charmed life. You know, Olive, when I was ill—I told you, didn't I?—the worst thing wasn't behaving in a peculiar way, or crying or not being able to eat or sleep, but *knowing* for certain, just as you know it's raining because you can feel the rain on your face, that nothing mattered. It was like being dead, but knowing you were dead.'

Olive said gently: 'But you've forgotten all that now.'

'All the rest but not that. It seemed important to remember that and I've thought about it a lot lately. Oh, Sam doesn't know, of course. He was marvellous, he stopped me being mad, but no one can ever really take away the bad things that have happened to someone else, can they? Don't you feel that?'

'Yes I do, as it happens.' Olive was thinking of Bob. He was in trouble, some trouble she could not assuage. He was tired all the time and yet seemed engaged in some tremendous effort. He was like someone fighting for life beyond the reach of doctors or of those who cared for him. She got up to draw the curtains. She had had the same fancies as Catherine, but they were not new to her. Why did imminent birth always bring on thoughts of death? 'There's only one thing the matter with us,' she said. 'We're both having babies and we haven't enough to do. We're fed up, that's all. This is the worst time. It's quite normal. Now come and help me bath Elizabeth. Bring the candle.'

The bathroom by candlelight took on the comfort of a warm cave. Elizabeth splashed and yelled with delight at the flickering shadows. Olive was quicker than usual getting her out. The candle was guttering. Catherine passed her the towel. 'Olive, do

you think there'll be another war?'

Elizabeth's firm little body squirmed on Olive's lap. 'The Korean nonsense? Probably. Honestly, I don't know. Here, can you hold Elizabeth for a minute, I'll get another candle.'

Olive lingered downstairs and when she came back Catherine was playing happily with Elizabeth. She had dried her and powdered her and put on her nightgown. 'It's the waiting, that's all.'

'I know.' Waiting for birth? Waiting for war? Olive lit the new candle and at that moment the electricity came back and the whole house was flooded with light.

After he left the garage in the evening Bob had taken to walking a while before he went home. Jack often asked him up to the flat but increasingly Bob found his brother's life depressing. He used to think of Jack as the only free man he knew: freed by a cheerful and frank self-interest from the ties of society, moral ties, political ties, free even of the obligations of patriotism. Not that he had ever done his country any harm, his wartime fiddling had been no more than an inspired exploitation of red tape. He'd feathered his own nest all right, but not from greed or fear—simply because given the situation, given his indifference to conventional morality, this was how he would behave. He was true to his own nature. How many men, Bob used to think, could say as much? For Jack the past was dead the moment they put it under the ground and that went for private history too. He'd never go back to Essex. He put down their grandfather as a mean old bastard. He had been fond of their father but the day he died he wrote him off The only bonds he acknowledged were those he had chosen: a mocking tenderness and respect for Bob, affection for his wife and daughter. He was not even possessed by worldly goods. If he lost his home and his business, well then, he'd start another and being Jack, naturally he'd survive. He told Bob once, I'm a real anarchist. Not like your pals; they say they want freedom but how can they be free? They set up committees and make plans and the moment you admit that you're against something, that you can't do it alone, then you stop being free. I look after number one. They can't get me down.

Then his wife, Mavis, was ill and it turned out that she had cancer. At first there seemed to be hope. She had an operation

and came home. Olive helped out. Bob made a point of going up to the flat every day but he and Olive agreed at last, they had never felt so impotent; not only because Mavis was going to die but because they had never liked her. 'Just because she's going to die, why can't we admit, she's stupid?' Olive asked. 'It's an insult to her really. Does it make anyone less of a person because they're dying?' They were shamefaced though, and they continued to visit until it became clear that Mavis, for all her stupidity, had rejected them. When she worked as a hospital orderly after the war Olive had seen many deaths. From this experience she had concluded that while there are all ways of dying no one, even in the most hideous extremity, wishes to die. At the end, even in coma, the will to live took over, the simple animal desire to survive. Last rites, the state of grace, were so much mumbo-jumbo beside the terror and vitality of the dying. It took people different ways. Mavis hung on to Jack as if he alone could save her.

Bob took him out for a drink They talked about the garage and the Korean situation until Jack said: 'You know what's the worst thing of all? The waiting. It could go on like this for a year, longer even.'

'Wouldn't she be better in hospital?'

'Yes, but then she'd know. While she's at home she can still imagine she might get better.'

'But you both realise . . .'

Jack nodded. Through this time he had shrunk, become a sketch of his former self; the cockiness still there but hollow. The impression he gave was not so much of anger and grief but of bewilderment that something he had not reckoned on had happened to him. 'Well,' he said, 'we know and we don't know, if you see what I mean. I keep thinking, it might be better for her if we could talk about it, but we can't, we never have talked like that. It's a rotten, dirty trick, isn't it?'

Rarely had Bob felt so helpless, only once perhaps, when his first wife, Moira, died and he had been too preoccupied with practical problems, with the war and with his own guilt to find out how much Alan was suffering. He had always been so scrupulous in his resolve never to use the boy as a weapon between them: then it was hard, almost impossible to make up for the years of closeness he had lost. With Jack the gulf was one partly of temperament, partly of circumstance. They had never

had anything deep in common apart from the roots of their affection, which were speechless: and never before in his life had Bob felt so incapable of establishing new lines of communication with anyone—it was difficult enough to find the energy for old relationships. He concluded limply: 'Well, if there's anything I can do.'

Jack smiled weakly. 'You've got enough on your plate. How's Olive?'

'Any day now.'

'Run you home?'

Bob shook his head. 'Thanks all the same. Keep in touch.'

Outside the pub he turned up his collar. There had been a change in the weather: the rain had stopped and now there was a biting wind with flurries of snow, though not enough to settle. Someone came out behind him.

'Bob Wilson, isn't it? I saw you in there but I didn't want to butt in.' The other man wore a thin raincoat and he clearly had a cold. Bob could not make out his features but there was something familiar about him. 'David Wright,' he explained. 'We met once or twice at the Institute. And I'm learning Russian with Alan—or rather failing to learn.'

'Of course. I'm sorry.' Bob had given a few talks at the Institute on trades unionism. Wright, he remembered now, was a local schoolteacher who occupied himself with Institute affairs and was involved with some kind of pacifist group. He had struck Bob as enthusiastic but a little naïve: he had the intellectual's manner which could be shyness or arrogance, it was hard to tell. Alan had never spoken of him. 'How are you?'

'I'd been hoping for a chance to speak to you.' When Bob nodded but did not respond, he went on: 'perhaps I could walk part of the way with you?'

Bob had been looking forward to his solitary walk. It had become an extraordinarily important part of his day. It seemed that Wright was heading for the Institute so Bob suggested they should continue in that direction. Then, he thought, he could hear whatever Wright wanted to say and still have his walk. If they had gone home he would have had to ask him in.

They turned down one of the streets which connect the Fulham Road and the King's Road. This meant they were walking into the wind. David Wright wore spectacles which he had to wipe every hundred yards or so as the snowflakes settled on the

lenses. In spite of this inconvenience and the thinness of his coat and his cold, David Wright was taking a childish pleasure in the weather: 'I do like snow, don't you?'

Against his will, for the last thing Bob wanted tonight was company, he was forced to smile. 'What did you want to see me about?'

'Well, you remember a few of us were trying to set up this committee?'

'The peace group?'

'Yes. Though I'm not sure about peace, that might be flying a bit high, and the word does have rather a thirties smell. The way I see it myself is initially a purely national movement with a few laid down, clear cut objectives. People are suspicious of bombast nowadays—rightly; we must be pragmatic. But there is a general unease and our aim would be to harness and direct that.'

They had turned into the King's Road and were approaching the Institute.

'How would you go about it?' Bob asked.

'Meetings, possibly a magazine.' David Wright spoke calmly, but Bob sensed an intensity behind his words. He guessed also that he had made this speech many times. 'The facts are there. All we have to do is present them, educate the public.'

'I've never found facts carry much weight with people in general.'

'They have never been faced by facts like this.'

'All the more reason why they should refuse to take them in.'

David Wright nodded. 'I agree, there's an apathy around But it could be just a cloak for fear. That's what I'm counting on. I admit, I don't think much of human nature. Where movements like this have gone wrong in the past was in appealing to goodness and altruism.'

Still reluctantly, Bob became interested. Wright was not so innocent after all. In another mood he might have found him impressive. 'What is your long-term aim?'

They had reached the Institute now and stood on the doorstep under the lamp.

'Unilateral nuclear disarmament.'

Bob drew in his breath. 'You're not asking for much.'

Classes were about to begin. Students were pouring in and

they were jostled off the doorstep into the shadows. Like conspirators, Bob thought. The mood of the whole evening had been furtive. the drink with Jack, time stolen from their wives, and now this. 'Why are you telling me?'

'I want to know if you'll join us.'

Bob laughed. 'What on earth could I do?'

'We need organisation, some really good administrators. Someone who's used to dealing with people: you've been a councillor and a trade unionist...'

'And a communist. They're not so popular now, you know.'

'That doesn't matter.'

'I'm still in the C.P. At least, I've still got my card.'

Someone called to David Wright and he waved to say he was coming. 'That's up to you. We still want you.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It needn't make any difference you know. Will you think about it? No hurry, though we'd like to get going as soon as possible. I'll hear from you then?'

By the time Bob shook his head David Wright had been plucked away, leaving Bob with no chance to explain that even if he wanted to accept his offer, it would have been impossible, for many reasons.

He walked on down Oakley Street to the river, pondering what he might have said to David Wright. But how could he explain that as soon as a course of action presented itself and struck him as attractive his mind supplied at once a reason for rejecting it? There was a world of difference between the bewilderment he observed in Alan and his friends, and his own paralysis. They were confused now but they would settle for something sooner or later, a cause or a personal attachment, something they could work for, be happy in, or for which they could enjoy a pleasurable suffering. At the moment it wasn't fashionable to die for anything, but that would change. It never passed through their minds that they might at some time feel all action to be futile. Perhaps there was another stage, one he hadn't reached yet, where even futility didn't matter so much.

Bob had no idea how long he had been resting against the embankment wall looking at the river but not seeing it. The cold whipped him on and he walked. He couldn't go on in this state. He should go home, but first he had to face up to the questions David Wright had sparked off. Two or three years ago he had

turned against violence, that was true. It had been not so much a decision as a reversal in his way of thinking and feeling which must have been in his mind for years but when it came to the point was as simple and dramatic as walking out and burning your house behind you. There was no going back on that. Yet he was still a communist and until he turned in his card he did not feel free to join David Wright or anyone else.

Yet it was years since he had done anything for the Party. When he gave up his job on the Council he had been charged by the London District Committee with bourgeois objectivism, and that, apparently, had been that, until a week ago when one of the Comrades, Larry Towers, had summoned him to District headquarters. He had always disliked Towers as a Party hack and the meeting did nothing to change his opinion. When all the old slogans were wheeled out Bob, overcoming a long built in discipline, laughed straight in his face. 'In a minute you'll tell me no one leaves the Party until they're chucked out or drop dead.' Towers replied in his grating voice that Bob was talking like an intellectual. He, at least, ought to know that you were with the Party or against it, there was nothing in between. Bob looked at the table between them and thought, if it had been anyone but Towers he would have tried to explain how much the Party had meant to him, how it had changed and coloured and saved his youth, how he would give anything to believe in it still. In his mind the dream was intact but he had begun to despair that it might ever be fulfilled. He thought how odious Towers was, how absurd the whole idea of communism in England had become. It also passed through his mind that Larry Towers was threatening him but he forgot this as soon as he got out into the clear air.

Nothing moved on the surface on the river. Where the lamps, clasped by twin dolphins, cast a beam of light the water's back heaved, but more like an oily canal than a flowing stream. When Olive had run off to Derbyshire before Elizabeth was born, leaving both her husband and Bob, her lover, he had walked by another part of this same river and remembered a time when he had been happy. He slapped his arms and pushed his hands in his pockets. He would finally leave the Party. Once he'd done that he would be free, really free, to act, or not to act, he'd have a breathing space, at least. Maybe he'd find out at last what it was to be a private man. He strode on, smiling foolishly to

himself. He'd been behaving all this time as if you had to wait for your life to change, as if you could only run before the wind. He laughed out loud.

Then he thought, but Stalin can't last much longer. Once he's dead the whole face of world communism could change for the better. Why not hold on a bit?

He decided he would put off David Wright and Larry Towers. As for leaving the garage, that was out of the question while Jack was in trouble.

He walked back to the point where Oakley Street met the embankment and there was a pub and a dim little enclosed shrubbery. It was dark and he had never seen anyone enter or leave it; even the birds and the dogs left it alone. It always depressed him. No, that was not true, he had only noticed it in the last couple of months. He wondered sometimes if he was going mad because of the way everything he saw on these nightly walks seemed so mysteriously significant and at the same time meaningless. The familiar city took on odd and threatening aspects: he turned into a quiet side-street and found a couple standing in a doorway quarrelling viciously; in one night he saw three accidents; a beautiful girl passed in a taxi kissing a dog; he stood outside his own house and saw Olive, waiting for him, push herself up heavily from her chair, put aside some sewing, turn on the wireless, and walk to the window. She lit a cigarette, stubbed it out, and shook her head. She twitched the curtain but did not draw it. To a stranger she would have seemed the embodiment of waiting, a picture in a window. Bob was disgusted with himself: Olive was all that mattered to him yet he could not walk in and take her hands and tell her so.

Well one thing was obvious, at least: until the child had been born there was no question of making a change in his life.

8

TOWARDS the end of February Alan told Bob and Olive that a couple of his friends who had done their national service had been called up as reservists for Korea. The rotten thing was, hardly anyone realised that this could be done.

Olive was outraged. He had never seen her angry before. 'You can't go! It's absurd. There's no question. It's the foulest thing I've heard of.' She looked ready to cry and quite soon after went to bed, leaving Alan with Bob.

'I didn't mean to upset her.'

'Do you fancy a drink?'

They walked together to the pub. In the dim street it was easier to talk. Bob paused under a tree to light a cigarette. They had not spoken for so long. Had they ever spoken? Moira took Alan to her Church, she hated politics, she said Bob was sending her to hell. What had the mumbling priests done to Alan? 'What will you do then?'

'David Wright said he could get me a job on his magazine.'

'Would you like that?'

'I think so. Yes, I would. It wouldn't pay much at first, of course.'

'And if you're called up?'

'I wouldn't go.'

'You'd desert?'

Alan nodded. They walked on, Alan kicking a stone in front of him, and neither spoke until Alan asked abruptly: 'What would you think if I did?'

Bob glanced sideways at Alan. He'd never had too much difficulty in understanding people but his own son was a mystery. He sensed that a lot hung on his reply. It could have been his own state of mind—at the moment he saw omens in everything—but it seemed possible even that on his answer depended his whole relationship with Alan. That was rubbish, of course, he told himself, things are not settled like that. He kept his tone

light but it was with an effort that he replied: 'You should do as you want. No one can make a decision like that for someone else.'

'What would you do yourself?'

'How can I say? I've never been in that situation.' He had given one wrong answer, he knew, and he was making it worse. He pondered. 'But if I were taking a step as drastic as that I'd need a good reason.'

'You've never acted without thinking have you, in your life? You've always had a political reason, a moral reason. You don't know your luck.'

'Is that how it looks to you?'

'Well, it's true, isn't it?'

Was it true? Bob knew that was the impression he gave to the world—a rational man; only Olive knew perhaps how false this was. Had he ever really made a choice in his life? Hadn't everything, when he looked back, been settled for him by other people or by circumstance? Last year he had tried to write a little, nothing ambitious, simply a straightforward account of his career in the Party—a way, perhaps, of getting it straight in his mind; but he had found when he began to write that in relating his experiences as a Party member he came up, all the time, against the necessity of seeing his life as a whole. And what emerged appalled him: decisions had been no more than giving way to the strongest option. There had been no integrity to his actions, no courage, no meaning. Perhaps this explained his feeling for Willi and his interminable history, they both recognised their helplessness. Willi's was racial, Bob's personal, that was the only difference. And if you were a Jew your despair was respectable.

He would have liked to believe that he was simply enduring the kind of anxieties which were supposed to afflict anyone who left the Party. Then there were the frustrations they had all felt after the war—was this just an aftermath? Even now, every day, you heard of some new horror. There seemed no corner on earth which was not contaminated. Yet Olive, who knew all this, was happy or appeared to be happy. Alan really believed that it mattered if he went to Korea or not.

Bob ignored his question, and asked one of his own. 'Why do you want to do this? What difference do you think it will make?'

'Not much, I suppose. But if you think like that you might as well be dead.'

That was the impression David Wright had given Bob: You might not change anything but you had to behave as if you could. If you were to do anything nowadays you had to blind yourself wilfully, quite coldly even, and believe that you would succeed. That was Bob's problem—he had had his eyes torn open, he couldn't act.

You used words but you were no closer; if anything, words came between you. Moira and the war had stolen Alan's childhood. And the truth was, you envied your own son because you saw in him the lost image of yourself.

Olive slept badly in the last month of her pregnancy. There were practical problems. She had not yet told Willi that he must go. She didn't like leaving Elizabeth with her mother while she was in hospital, but what else could she do? She worried about Bob and Polly and Alan.

These anxieties were real and could be faced if not disposed of. The other dreads were nameless and less easily placated. She woke, usually around four in the morning, from a recurrent, muddled dream she could not remember, except that she dared not sleep for fear of returning to it.

Before Elizabeth was born she was having lunch with her father-in-law in a Derbyshire hotel. There were two Scotsmen arguing thickly at another table. Their goblin-talk seemed to be inside her head. It garbled and made gibberish of life. She had forgotten them until now.

Then she heaved herself out of bed, went downstairs and made a cup of tea. The cat watched her, all eyes, but did not rouse from its basket. It was dying, all bones and rage like a cartoon cat, but the sores in its mouth and the gummy eyes not funny. Its coat was already dead, only bloody mindedness kept it alive and Olive was appalled at the thought of touching it, letting it rub its crusts, its scabs, the place where the fur had left the bone, against her leg. So, of course she had to touch it, because it was untouchable. The cat knew, she knew, but it humped itself on to her lap, all the same.

The kitchen was cold. Olive had a sense of her life, something left over from the dream perhaps, as circles touching, flowering, overlapping, meeting, exploding, life teeming around her, using

her, forgetting her, but no contact no true meeting, anywhere. They had had a few people in that evening. Alan had brought a girl, Sheila Robbins, and some schoolteacher from the Institute had called to see Bob. They had talked for a while in the kitchen, then come in for coffee. The conversation, at first desultory, had become heated, in a friendly way. Bob and David Wright seemed to be carrying on a dialogue they had started in the kitchen, and Olive had the impression Bob was taking up an attitude he did not really feel. He was trying to provoke David Wright. Or was he hoping to be convinced? They were arguing about some peace group David Wright was trying to start. Bob said it was childish to expect the West to disarm unilaterally. 'Really,' said Bob, 'the best thing you could do, if you were a physicist and if you really wanted peace, would be to defect to the Soviet Union.' 'You mean the only chance is a balance of terror?' 'Something like that.' David Wright shook his head decisively. 'That's not the way.' Alan suggested: 'But you must admit, no pacifist group has ever achieved anything.' 'But this will be different.' Bob cut in: 'You mean you'll have nothing to do with politics? You really think you can do anything without politics?' 'Well, of course, we'll have to use the best brains from any party. Right, left, we don't care. Let them all come.' Bob smiled. 'So you'll finish as just another leftist movement.' David Wright flushed. 'I'd take the devil himself.' This seemed to delight Bob. For the first time for weeks he was in high spirits. Sheila followed Olive into the kitchen. 'Can I do anything?' 'I'm just tired. I wanted to sit here for a minute.' When the girl looked embarrassed Olive added quickly, 'don't go.' She had hoped that Sheila might talk but all she said was, 'This is a nice kitchen.'

Apparently Bob had heard Olive get up.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.'

'I wasn't asleep.' Bob poured himself a cup of tea. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm not giving birth, if that's what you mean.'

He smiled and took her hand across the table. 'We shouldn't have so many people in. It's too much for you.'

'I can't stand all this talk. I'm perfectly all right, but I can't bear the way you all go on. I can't live like this. We talk all the time but not one of us tells the truth.'

He seemed hurt. 'I've never lied to you.'

'Is that really true?'

'Of course it is.'

For some reason they whispered though neither Elizabeth nor Willi could have heard them. Olive thought to herself, this life is killing us, but she did know what she meant. Was it her present state, or was this what a happy marriage did to you, released the mad bitch? So outwardly calm and happy, in harmony with your home and your life, you became inwardly frantic and insatiable. You could not bear to hear people talking of politics, grinding out their own problems, because you needed all your energy to cope with this awful raving creature inside you. Which made you no better than Polly, after all. Polly would probably go mad if she didn't have a child, but at least she would know why she was mad.

Such an effort to be reborn, Willi had said. Was that it? Olive had resisted this marriage for a long time then suddenly accepted it. She had allowed herself to be married, she loved Bob, there was no doubt of that; she had exchanged the image of the cellar in the ruined city for the safe house, but she had not taken into account the degree to which she herself would have to change, or rather to admit parts of herself she had never before recognised: the bitch and the woman in love.

What a time for illuminations. She didn't care much for smoking at the moment but she lit a cigarette, which would almost certainly make her sick. Bob was watching her anxiously and she smiled: 'Marriage is ridiculous isn't it? I mean, how on earth can two people ever know anything about one another? I'm not even sure that they should.'

Bob did not answer her directly. 'I haven't been much use to you lately, have I?'

'You can't tell me?'

He shook his head. 'I wish I could. I don't even understand myself. I'll get over it; but can you hang on?'

'I'll survive. It's nothing. It was just those people.'

He touched her as if he were afraid she might thrust him away. 'I do love you, you know that?'

'I know.' The child kicked viciously and Olive clutched her side. It passed almost at once and she picked up the mugs and carried them to the sink. She washed one mug and put it on the

rack. She washed the other mug and put it on the rack. She emptied the teapot, frowning slightly.

Bob came home one night and announced that he was being followed. He told Olive about the interview with Larry Towers and the veiled threats. Olive said this was absurd. Why should they leave him alone all this time and come after him now? In any case, this was not how the Party worked in England. Bob said it might not be the Party, it could be the police, he was a known communist, there was a red scare on. Olive was troubled and saw a psychiatrist friend of Polly's. She said that Bob was showing symptoms of paranoia. On the other hand, he could be telling the truth.

A week before the child was born Olive was seized by the need for action. For the first time that winter she left the house every day.

At least she needn't worry about her mother. The prospect of having her grandchild to herself for a few days had rejuvenated Mrs. Armitage. She threw off her symptoms and when Olive wondered if it might not be too much for her, insisted she was not an old woman yet, she and Elizabeth would manage very well. Indeed, it looked as if she could hardly wait for Olive to be gone. She would put up the cot there and if Elizabeth woke early then they could keep each other company.

'I didn't know you were sleeping badly, Mother?'

Sleep didn't count for so much as one grew older. Everyone was talking about insomnia nowadays, as if it mattered. That silly girl upstairs took sleeping pills. She hoped Olive had more sense? She was looking tired. Had she got a really good doctor, there were so many young fools around? No one seemed to know how to live any more.

Olive thought, in a way her mother was right. Bob was in some unfathomable trouble, Chris had sold out to Mary Owens, Catherine's marriage too was a bolt-hole. Willi, Catherine, Bob, Chris, Polly, Dulcie Connor, Alan, none of them were happy, except perhaps Polly who had built everything on one hope. Was it the times or had it always been like this? Did life always diminish and erode?

No one seemed to know how to live any more. Olive had gone to see the psychiatrist, thinking something like that. Expecting some kind of monster and resisting the whole project so that she

put off the appointment till the last moment then flung herself into a taxi, she had found a dowdy, sympathetic, rather tired looking woman of her own age. She had almost stopped the taxi, nearly fled the waiting room. Only mad people went to see psychiatrists. As though women, nine months pregnant, rushed in every day to ask if their husbands were mad, Miss Fraser explained quite kindly and calmly that without seeing Bob it was impossible to assess his mental state. From what Olive told her, he was clearly a sensitive man, therefore at some time in his life, like most sensitive and intelligent people, he was likely to go through a crisis. Equally, one should not assume a pathological condition. He could be speaking the truth. Yes, of course, she would be glad to see him, but there were times when she wondered if people wouldn't be better off curing themselves, if in mending them she didn't rob them of some vital human attribute.

'But he believes he's being persecuted. He might kill himself. I don't know what's happening to him.'

What's wrong with all of us, Olive wanted to ask but she said with a smile to proclaim her own sanity: 'Do you find a lot of people seem to be in this state?'

'Yes, I nearly went out of business in the war.'

'Well then, perhaps we need another war.' As Olive left she admitted, feeling foolish, 'I didn't expect it to be like this.'

'What did you expect?'

Jack's wife, Mavis, was dying slowly, irritably. Olive sat by her all one March afternoon waiting. Her own swollen stomach embarrassed her here by the deathbed, she felt gross with life and shamefully glad to be alive. How absurd it was. She did not want to come and Mavis did not want her here. They had nothing to say to each other. Mavis was still a silly, empty, clinging woman, and death did not ennoble her. She was dying badly, whining, and who could say they would do any better? It was difficult to die well nowadays. Death had been pushed away into a cupboard. Well, yes, people had heartfelt, intelligent, well-informed discussions about the possibility, probability, of nuclear warfare, some were genuinely concerned, a few got a pleasurable thrill from the idea, but not one of these people seriously contemplated their own death. Many of those of Bob's age had not expected to survive the war. And in the war Miss Fraser

nearly went out of business. Now the shops were full, abundant and brightly lit, Korea was a long way away, you could go home and expect your house to be standing, and Miss Fraser was doing very nicely.

Polly said the King looked terribly tired, the poor dear. Olive could not believe she was serious but she was. There were still people in England who actually worried about the monarch. But she treasured Polly, she loved her. They went together to see Catherine, whose son, Daniel, had been born after a protracted labour, the afternoon Olive was sitting with Mavis. 'She's had a bad time,' Sam had said on the telephone. Catherine was sitting up in bed in the private clinic in a bower of flowers. She had a blue bow in her hair and looked like a child. 'It's funny,' she said cheerfully, 'I can't stop crying. Apparently everyone does.'

Polly plonked down grapes and magazines and went to see Daniel. Olive asked lightly: 'Was it frightful?'

'Oh no. I didn't know what was going on most of the time.'

'You will forget, you know.'

'Honestly, I'm perfectly all right. Sam's been so nice. Everyone's been nice. Don't you want to see Daniel?'

Olive smiled. 'It's you I want to see.'

'He's rather sweet. Everyone's been marvellous. They told me I made a fuss.'

'That's quite normal.'

'And I was so happy. Then I started crying. I hated Sam for a bit. I wouldn't feed Daniel. You'd have thought I'd murdered my mother the way they went on. Sam sat here for hours looking like a sad dog. I felt like some kind of monster. I couldn't say while Polly was here. It can't be natural. I'm so tired. I want to sleep all the time. I hate him Olive, I don't want him. I shouldn't be talking like this to you. Don't tell Polly. I think I'm going mad again. I want to go home. I want to be left alone. I want to live!'

PART TWO

9

'WHAT about the third man?'

'Oh, I don't think that's very likely, do you?'

'Well someone must have tipped them off.' Polly was shocked by the whole business. To think they'd had positions of trust all these years. They had betrayed their country!

Bob suggested mildly: 'Perhaps there were things they valued above their country. I'm not sure nationalism isn't out of date.'

Polly glared. 'You would say that! I can't think why you don't go and live in Russia.' She laughed, a little too brightly. After their scene last year matters had been more or less patched up on Bob's side. He treated Polly with an extra gentleness but she still goaded him.

Bob smiled. 'I haven't the slightest desire to live in the Soviet Union.'

Edward said: 'What worries me is that this will only serve to increase the hysteria. I wouldn't like to see a witch-hunt in England. We're getting more like America every day.' His publishing house had caused a mild stir recently by bringing out the memoirs of a Russian agent now defected to the West, whitewashed and allowed to live in freedom and write because of special and tragic circumstances. His family had been threatened, he had been forced to spy, his activities as a double agent had been uncovered and his wife and daughter had been sent to a labour camp. His wife had died. He had no idea what had happened to his daughter. The greatest sensation in his memoirs had been a detailed account of Russia's espionage activities in the West during the war.

Bob asked in a friendly tone: 'And you don't feel the Shuklov confessions contributed to the hysteria?'

Edward rubbed his moustache. 'I'd be just happy to publish Burgess or Maclean if that were ever possible.' This was Polly and Edward's housewarming. Olive was enjoying it—the first time she had been to a party since Paul was born. She listened

only vaguely to the conversation.

Bob went on: 'Isn't that rather a break with tradition?'

'Tradition?' Edward smiled. 'Oh, you mean Williamson's have always kept clear of controversy. Well yes, I must admit Shuklov was something new for us. I had to put up quite a fight.' His mild eyes flickered. 'I was surprised to find I enjoyed it.'

Olive took a cigarette. She was drinking a little too much but she would not get drunk and she would not have a hangover because she was enjoying herself. Edward intrigued her. No one was ever as simple as they seemed.

'What were your motives?'

Edward pondered. 'Mischievous? I wouldn't mind seeing the ivory tower crash down. There is also the point that Shuklov was a certain best-seller. That is the kind of book people want to buy now.'

'What about novels?'

'Well, of course, there will always be a number of people who want to read fiction. And there are some interesting young writers coming up. We shall publish them as we always have. But I don't really think there's much future for the novel.'

'That seems to me very sad. When people stop reading or writing novels they are really in despair.' Once, Olive thought, I would have taken sides. When I was sure of myself I would have attacked Edward, or said of course there was nothing wrong with purely commercial motives. Now I simply don't know but it doesn't seem to worry me. There is some enormous truth to be told somewhere but Shuklov hasn't said it, nor have Edward's interesting young writers.

Shuklov himself was here tonight, holding court. He smoked menthol cigarettes through a filtered holder. He had a young face, grey hair, and he dealt politely with his various admirers, a shade more enthusiastically with the younger females. His accent was faultless, his suit was expensive and he had made a special hit with Polly who swam off to make yet another valuable introduction. Olive was left with Edward.

'You don't like him?'

'No,' she said, 'I don't. How did you know?'

'You didn't ask to be introduced.'

'I'm feeling rather lazy tonight. Is he drunk?'

'Not exactly.' Edward hesitated. 'He takes drugs.'

'What drugs?'

'Morphine.'

'Does Polly know?'

'I thought it better not to tell her.'

'You were right.' Olive tried to think about Shuklov, his wife dead. Edward was watching her. She grinned. 'Oddly, that makes me like him better.'

'Why?'

'Because now I have something in common with him.' Seeing Edward's startled look Olive laughed: 'Oh, I don't mean that. To tell you the truth I don't know what I do mean.'

Edward wasn't letting her off so easily. 'I've never seen you as the sort of person who runs away from life. Quite the opposite.'

'Well, I've never had as much as Shuklov to run away from, have I? Maybe that's why I don't like him, because I smelt we were blood brothers under the skin.'

'His motives were genuine, you know. He was sickened with the Soviet system.'

'And he hoped to find something better here?'

'Well, naturally.'

Olive wondered how many others in that room would say 'naturally'. Neither she nor Bob would. What was natural nowadays anyway? Edward's placid faith in his country was so more unnatural than Alan's bitter rejection of it. Shuklov himself, sitting there on a silk cushion by a milky lamp talking about Russia to a pretty girl, was in himself evidence that there was no longer a moral universe, certainly no system of ethics you could recommend to the young. You couldn't tell Alan to become a communist or a Christian and you could hardly suggest he tried morphine. It was absurd really, the human need for something which was, except at rare moments of history, beyond human experience. We have nothing but our own lives and there's no contact there, or only the most fleeting. Bob is older than me, he'll die before me, he may even take his own life and I'll make a bad widow, raging and sullen. There's nothing like birth for bringing on thoughts of death. Paul and Elizabeth will bury me and they'll be sorry for a while and then they'll forget me. But I have been happy, I'm happy now at this moment. 'Polly seems to be enjoying herself.'

Polly did indeed look magnificent, in control of her party, at home in her splendid house, handsome in the way pregnant

women are supposed to be handsome. For the first time in her life she had style and Olive could see that Edward too was admiring his wife. On an impulse she said: 'I hope you didn't worry too much about that scene at our party last year. She'll be all right now, you know.'

Edward was still watching his wife. 'I hope so,' he said. 'I haven't been much help, I'm afraid. I don't understand people who pin everything on one hope. It's simply not in my nature.'

Polly caught his eye and beckoned. Olive settled deeper into the comfortable cushions. Without her noticing, her glass had been filled, it was that kind of party. I've been shut away too much, Olive thought, this is good. I don't want money. I don't want a house like this, it would smother me, but I relish visiting this kind of house. Once, at a party, I would have looked so eagerly for a friend, a lover or an enemy. Now I am perfectly happy to sit here. Edward is right. One should not pin everything on a single hope.

She looked round. Polly was talking to Shuklov with Edward beside her. Edward touched her arm and she let it rest there for a moment and then so lightly drew it away. Bob joined them and stood, appearing to listen, though Olive felt reasonably certain he was not listening at all. For a brief moment Olive saw him not as her husband but as a stranger, the workings of whose mind were utterly mysterious. A classless, good-looking, middle-aged man, who had perhaps, from the lines of strain around his eyes, recently been ill? Attractive to women? Yes. If he really was going off his head, no sign of it tonight. Contained, secretive, lonely, but not mad. If she could will him not to be mad!

Someone was watching her. A raw, disjointed young American came and sat by her on the sofa. He introduced himself as Rowan something, did not ask her name, stared at her breasts and told her that the world was rotten, America was rotten, a third world war was imminent and why the hell wasn't she drinking? What was she doing here anyway with all these rotten people?

'Some of these rotten people are my friends. And if you feel like that what are you doing here yourself?'

He smiled, a sudden smile of great charm, reminding her of Alan. 'I'm just looking around. I was going anyway, then I thought you'd have dinner with me.'

'I think not.' But she smiled. They drank together. Why not?

'You're a journalist, aren't you?'

He nodded. He was probably not as drunk as he looked. 'You want to dance?'

'No.'

'You want to come to bed with me?'

Olive laughed. Five minutes ago thoughts of death, and now she was being asked to bed. It was absurd, of course, out of the question, yet inside her the female cat responded. She herself was sober, her mind clear, it was the cat who had been drinking. Down puss. 'I *am* sorry,' she said, 'truly. I wasn't laughing at you. But I can't, you know.'

Rowan cracked his knuckles. Tim Connor used to do that. Tim was mad.

'Would you see me again?'

'Why would you want to? You know nothing about me.'

'I know you're the only human being in this goddam room. I was watching you. You were warm, you were still, you were thinking. D'you know how transparent your face is? Can you imagine what it's like being an American? We've bought Europe and we don't know what the hell to do with it, except to make it into another missile base. I'm ashamed in Europe. Can you imagine that?'

'I nearly married an American.'

'It's lousy being American. Look, I was sent to interview that Russian bum and tomorrow I'll be sober and I'll ask the obvious questions and he'll give me all the stuff about freedom and western democracy. And I'll cable my piece and throw up. He won't mean what he says, I won't mean what I write. Shuklov can't live in Russia, I'm ashamed for America, Europe's down the drain, so how are we supposed to live?'

'It's easier for women, I suppose,' Olive murmured, 'families, children.'

'Look.' He jabbed one bony finger in her face. 'There are signs everywhere. I've got facts, figures, on Russian concentration camps. There are people in America who want to drop the bomb on Russia now. I've been to Korea. I come to Europe, I say Europe will be all right, and your friend Edward says come to my party, Shuklov'll be there, and I talk to people, editors, politicians, writers, your friends, and all your friends in Europe are saying the same thing: we're tired, we've fought a war, we don't want to know, we're impotent. I'm twenty-three. My wife

left me and took the boy. There was no reason. She's wretched. She's alone now with the boy. We meet once a month or so and you know what we do? We cry. Her analyst says she shouldn't see me, her lawyer says she shouldn't see me and I can guess what her mother says. Her mother's top bitch. When I think of Marianne I think of the things I'd do to her mother. And I can't even punch Shuklov in the face. God! you're beautiful. You know that?'

Olive shook her head but she was pleased. Tomorrow she would return to her normal life. When you are leading a normal life you do not think very much about the world ending or your husband going mad or your own death. People, the kind of people who were in this room, wrote books about the victims of history; yet in the Russian revolution, in Israel, now in Berlin and Korea, there would be women living normal lives in houses.

'I don't think you can live like that, you know. You've got to keep things separate.' Oh lord, I'm getting wise-drunk, earth mother. 'I mean, because you despise Shuklov doesn't have anything to do with Marianne. The things you talk about aren't signs. When you talk about omens you're really talking about yourself. You mean you don't have the courage to live with your wife.'

'You would say that, you're a woman.'

'Yes?'

'No. I didn't mean that.' Rowan hesitated and stared at his knuckles. 'You're right. You have to be right.'

Olive thought, right and wrong don't come into it. You see life one way or another and your view is constantly shifting. 'Tell me about Marianne.'

'She was an ordinary, average American girl. She wanted kids and an icebox. I guess that's all. Not much, really. And she wanted me home nights. Can I see you again?'

Olive wondered. 'Well perhaps. We'll see.'

He pushed his fists into his eyes. He's like a child, she thought, but he is not a child He was rocking himself on the sofa. 'I'm sorry,' she said, not knowing what she was apologising for, 'I'm sorry.' What should she apologise for? Being married? Loving her husband? Not being Marianne? Being English? Not hating Shuklov? Refusing to believe that they were all doomed because they were enjoying a good party? Rowan shook his head, blew his nose and drifted off to get another drink.

Catherine took his place.

'I thought you were asleep.'

Olive opened her eyes and smiled. 'How's Danny? You look well.'

'I am. Who was that madman trying to rape you?'

Olive explained about Rowan, all the time trying to see how Catherine was. Apparently, she really was all right. They needn't have worried. Catherine was sane, so why should Olive have a sense of loss because Catherine was sane? Catherine went on. Danny was marvellous. This Spanish girl was working out very well. Sam was so sweet with Danny. Did Olive like this dress? Sam didn't choose this one. She'd bought it herself and she wasn't sure if she ought to take it in?

'It's lovely.'

Catherine touched her ring. What was it about her face? Something gone, vulnerability gone? But then Catherine had always been too defenceless for her own good. Women, even more than men, had to break or change. Only a madman would say it was better for them to break, so this change in Catherine was obviously desirable.

Sam Davies loomed up, beaming. He had got fatter. Olive always saw him as a magician and used to worry just how benevolent he was. He'd saved Catherine's sanity, anyway.

'The two most beautiful women in the room.'

'Thirsty women.'

'Wait! And your thirst shall be quenched.' He went after drink. He was not just fatter but more Jewish, the father of the family. Now it was Sam who was vulnerable. He would be back soon.

'Cat? Things really are all right?'

'Of course.' Catherine grinned. 'Did you think I was going mad again?' Then more seriously, repenting perhaps of her flippancy, she added quietly: 'I honestly don't believe that will happen again. I'm much stronger now, you know. I suppose it's Danny, partly, but just over the last few months I don't seem to care so much. Those waterworks in the clinic didn't mean a thing, everyone does it.'

Olive smiled at the reversal in their rôles. 'You don't think about Charlie now?' Charlie had been Catherine's father, Mrs. Armitage's second husband. It was after his death Catherine had had her breakdown.

'Yes, I do sometimes and I feel sad, but that's all, just sad. I realise now one shouldn't count on other people too much. I mean, they die or they go away or they let you down. Well, Danny, of course, I couldn't bear anything to happen to him, but that's natural, isn't it? And I'm determined not to smother him. Oddly enough, I think I'm quite a good mother. It's funny how things work out, isn't it?'

Sam brought the drinks and carried Catherine off to meet Shuklov. 'Don't you want to meet our lion?' he asked Olive, but she shook her head. Someone had pulled back the rug and several couples were dancing to the gramophone. Olive pondered what Catherine had said, and wondered how far to believe her. When someone who has been too fragile announces they are now strong, why doubt them? Catherine's statement had been calm and sensible, she herself was convinced, and this was surely a matter for rejoicing. If some feeling had been lost, if their relationship was infinitesimally changed, less close, then that was right too. Catherine could not remain a child for ever and there are worse things than loss of innocence. Shuklov couldn't live with his country, Catherine would never again, perhaps, live with the same intensity which had driven her mad, but both must be better off than Chris whose life depended on that drab little wife. What about Rowan? Where did he fit in? Why did Alan trouble her so? I'm looking for trouble, Olive decided, all I have to do is get on with my own life, which is exactly the life I would have chosen. People are interesting, of course, but the point comes where you have to admit that your energy is limited and you can't go to the stake for anyone else, even for those you love. Break or change. What an oversimplification of the complex, fascinating process of life! Was there, as some women like Dulcie Connor seemed to feel, a continuum, a stream you could run with; or was it all as chaotic as it looked? Tonight it didn't seem to matter so much that she really had no idea what was the truth of it all. There was Bob coming across the room towards her. 'Look,' she said, 'I hadn't realised. We can see our house from here.'

Everyone was dancing. They danced.

'I went to see Tim.'

Tim had been sitting in the madhouse but he was not transformed; lanky, red-haired, raw-boned, as ever; cracking his knuckles.

'How was he?' Olive felt sure her pang of alarm did not show in her face. There was no reason at all why visiting an old friend in a mental hospital should do Bob any harm. Olive was ashamed, all the discomfort she used to feel in visiting Catherine when she was ill, flooded back. Mavis dying was still Mavis, Catherine had been no less herself because she was mad and Tim was still Tim—more so, perhaps; he had never lived comfortably in the world of the so-called sane. Yet mental illness appalled her. She avoided it as other people crossed the road to shun a widow, as if horror were catching. I'm just a coward, she thought. I'm not dying, I'm not mad, I'll never see Rowan again, it's Willi's own fault if he won't go to Israel. As for the bomb, people talked themselves silly about it but who actually lost a night's sleep worrying about atomic warfare? Rowan's signs were nothing more than anxiety about his private life, which did seem rather pathetic. 'Did Tim know you?'

'On and off. They don't seem to think he'll get better.'

'That's awful!'

Bob smiled. 'I don't know. He's as full of plots as ever. Perhaps we worry too much about being sane. Are you tired? Do you want to go home?'

'I'm enjoying myself. Do you realise, this is the first time we've ever danced together? I suppose I should go and see Tim.'

Edward took Olive away, very jolly. 'We can't have this. Dancing with your own husband.' But it was not quite a joke. Edward would be a bad dancer. He was. They plodded round, chatting. 'You're looking very well tonight,' Edward said, and it struck Olive for the first time that Edward found her physically attractive. When he said how well she looked he marginally increased the pressure on her waist. God save us from Englishmen, she thought but she was amused. Not so long ago she had looked at her naked body in the mirror and admitted to herself cheerfully enough that this pregnancy would mean the end of certain female vanities. Yet two men tonight, not her husband, had desired her. Across Edward's shoulder she saw Rowan, lolling on the floor with his back against the wall, cradling a drink. He was very drunk but he managed, shakily, to raise his glass to her. He grinned in ironic salute. It was quite probable that he was a sham, a hollow boy who found cosmic excuses for his own inadequacy; it was also possible that he was suffering terribly.

We are tired, she thought, smiling vaguely at Edward; Rowan was right. It was bad after the war, but it's worse now in a way because it has become quite obvious how powerless we are. So we make a virtue of being powerless and we live as we can.

Olive was right, you could see the house from here. The light was on downstairs—that would be Alan and Sheila in the kitchen—but Willi's room was in darkness. Willi would not be asleep though. There would be someone, under the tree, watching the house.

Tim had been the same as ever. If he was raving then he had always been raving. He said they were spying on him. Fuck them all. He was an enemy of the state. Since he'd been here he'd had time to think and had drawn up the perfect plan for revolution. This sounded so like Tim, Bob was reassured. They were sitting in the bleak lounge. 'Come on,' said Tim, 'let's get away from these biddies.'

They walked round the small, dusty garden in the middle of the city, then sat on the bench under a flowering almond. The blossom was pretty but the wind was raw. Tim seemed not to notice it though he wore no coat and his hands were blue. Even sitting, he moved all the time, running his fingers up and down his thin shanks, folding and re-folding his legs. The garden was like a room, the sky, crossed by vapour trails, the roof. 'Give us a light,' Tim said. 'They don't let us play with matches.'

'But you can smoke?'

'As long as there's someone with us.'

Bob nodded. He told himself, later he told Olive, that Tim was the same as ever, but he was not. He was more himself, so entirely himself that he could not be allowed loose in civilised society. When he spoke of his wife, Dulcie, and his children, he cried as a child cries, without shame; he kept coming back to the revolution, but here his coherence broke down entirely and he could no longer sit still but had to walk about the garden, flailing his long arms so that the garden seemed too small to contain him. 'Break!' he kept crying, 'break!' and crashed his fist against the wall until the skin was torn and he bled.

'It was a bore for you, wasn't it?'

'Why should you think that?' Bob smiled and took Olive's arm. They were walking home. It was a warm May evening.

Only last week Bob had sat with Tim and watched the bitter wind tear the blossom from the almond tree. Now the air was mild, voices murmured at an open window and as they turned down the same street he had walked in the other direction with David Wright that winter, they passed an odd little cul-de-sac of artisans' cottages which had somehow survived the attentions of the middle class. A woman in a blue apron sat sewing in the low doorway as if this were not a dark city evening but a summer afternoon in the country. Honeysuckle smothered a shed at the bottom of the small garden and in the darkness, miraculously, a man was digging. The vision seemed important to Bob; not romantically or intellectually, not in any way he could interpret at all, unless it were something he had known and forgotten. It was an hallucination. By daylight the earth which looked so rich would be dust, the house barely fit for human habitation, yet the picture seized him, he was possessed by it as he had been so mysteriously possessed by the illusion of a wide Essex sky from Jack's window a year ago.

'Well, you don't like parties, do you?'

'Not much,' Bob admitted. 'How did you get on?'

'I had a good time. In fact I think I'm rather drunk. I'm not sure I shouldn't get drunk more often.'

Couples drifted towards them, twined; they seemed weightless in the milky air. The woman in the blue apron was scolding a child half dead with sleep. Whatever did one do with this fearful female energy, Olive thought? It came in such sudden, unpredictable surges, she felt it tonight even before she started drinking. And tomorrow it would be dissipated, in hangover or in the normal business of daily life. Perhaps when Paul was a little older, if they could afford help, she might get a part-time job. Yes, there was no doubt she should find work.

They strolled on. Olive's mind was still spinning with her impressions of the party and she felt gay. She wanted so much to convey her mood to Bob. In the past it would have been easy: she would simply have said 'I'm happy,' and he would have responded. Now she pressed his arm and began to talk lightly of the party. Edward had been like a mother hen with Shuklov; wouldn't it be extraordinary to live that kind of rich life like the Carters? She couldn't imagine it. She related some gossip about Shuklov and could have made a joke of Rowan,

but for some reason she did not. They were approaching their own street. 'Catherine really seems to have settled down. She's much happier.'

'And you?'

'I'm fine. I'm always fine.'

Bob grinned. 'You mean you've had three double whiskies. Or was it four?'

'That could be it. But I really am happy tonight.' They lingered outside the house, like a courting couple, and she pressed her face against his shoulder. There was no hurry, after all, to think about a job. Time enough when this trouble was over.

'We ought to go in,' Bob said gently. 'Alan will want to take Sheila home.' He touched her cheek with his finger and looking up, smiling, Olive saw that in spite of the warmth of the moment Bob's face wore the same watchful, guarded expression she had noticed so often lately; even at home on a quiet evening he could hardly sit still in his chair—after half an hour of pretending to read he would go up to Willi, or in the middle of conversation would walk to the window and pull back the curtain. Suddenly Olive was wildly, desperately sober, and she burst out: 'What is it? Why won't you tell me? The street's empty! What do you think you can see? If only you'd tell me, I might be able to help.'

'Come in. Come indoors. You're tired. We'll talk tomorrow.'

'We never talk nowadays. What's happened? What can you see? There's nothing there. Look!' If she could, she would have dragged him physically across the road to show him that those were only shadows under the tree. He looked so worried, so perplexed, Olive was at once filled with remorse. Bob was right, this was neither the time nor the place and tomorrow everything might look different. She felt sick and cold and dull. She had drunk too much after all.

'I'm sorry,' she said, touching his sleeve. 'Let's go in.' They truly did love one another very much, this she believed, though there were times when she wondered if she believed in love at all. It was a feeble word for the infinitely complex and fragile bonds which held a man and woman together. Words were the enemy of love, and pride and the mad bitch and the idea that anyone had the right to happiness. And three double whiskies.

There was her house, her children sleeping and she would get

up at seven and change Paul and feed him and give Bob and Elizabeth their breakfast and ring Polly and her mother was dying and the cat and Willi must go.

'There's a queer smell round here. Had you noticed?'

'Drains, I expect,' she said. 'I can't smell anything. Come on. Let's go indoors.'

10

'WHAT are you doing in the kitchen? You do look solemn.' As soon as they came in Bob said he would go to bed. 'I'll get myself some coffee,' she said, 'but I won't be long. You go up. Sure you won't have some? Well, I suppose I'm the one that needs it.' The idea of Olive being drunk had become rather a limp little joke between them, something to cover the appalling questions which had not been raised. So Bob went on upstairs and Olive heard the wood complain as he climbed the last uncarpeted flight to Willi's attic. Coffee would keep her awake, but if Bob was going to spend half the night talking to Willi she might just as well drink coffee. One of the things about marriage was that you could not sleep, literally sleep, alone.

Still wearing her coat, Olive went to the stove and put on the kettle for coffee. Sheila Robbins and Alan were sitting at the kitchen table.

'We've made some,' Sheila said. 'I'll get it for you.' She seemed grateful to have something to do.

'Real coffee!' Olive sighed. What was wrong? Had they had a row? Sheila asked her about the party and she told them briefly. They were interested, naturally, in Shuklov. 'He seemed very ordinary to me,' Olive said.

'Poor sod.' Alan was cracking matchsticks and dropping them in a saucer.

Sheila said: 'It must have been worse for his wife?'

'But he has to go on living,' Olive murmured. She did not want to discuss Shuklov but they were both waiting to hear, so she told them a little of what Edward had said. She did not mention the morphine but she gave them her opinion: 'Whatever he's done, he's paying for it now. I think he's very unhappy.'

Sheila, on her way to the door to fetch cigarettes from the sitting room, stopped suddenly; stranded she seemed and vulnerable as if the ordinary kitchen had become enemy territory.

The other two were struck by her anger. Alan watched; Olive looked down as though the girl were too bright. 'He should be,' Sheila said. 'He killed his wife. He might just as well have poisoned her or cut her throat.'

She blazed and she was very young. She reminded Olive of Catherine as she had once been, a little perhaps of herself. If the young were ever angry enough to make innocence a moral force, how powerful they would be. But implicit in innocence was ignorance, so it was the wrong word, for if Sheila was open-eyed it was not in wonder.

Olive was so sunk in the sick coldness she could hardly rouse herself. She managed to smile: 'He had his reasons, you know. He was sick of Russia.'

'You mean, he was sick of life.'

'You could be right.' After all, Olive herself had said much the same to Rowan of his attitude to his wife. 'But then the M.V.D. were on to him. He had to get out.'

Sheila was rarely harsh in her judgements but she would not be placated now and she was angry: 'Well, he disgusts me. It's a good thing I didn't meet him. I simply don't understand how anyone could behave like that.' She was near to tears. There was more to this, Olive guessed, than an argument about Shuklov. But she liked the girl, she had not meant to upset her and when Sheila had left the room she said as much to Alan. 'I don't know what it is about Shuklov. He seemed pathetic to me. But he sets everyone off. Whereas most people tonight took Burgess and Maclean as a rather splendid joke. Except Edward and he thinks we're in for some kind of anti-Red pogrom.'

Alan said: 'Sheila believes in people.'

'Don't we all?'

'No, I don't think we do.' He smiled. 'It's an idea everyone pays lip-service to but they'd run a mile if they had to act on it. Needless to say, Sheila considers that a deeply cynical attitude. I hope she's right. I really hope she's right.'

Olive thought of Rowan saying with such intensity: you're right, you have to be right. She realised she herself had stopped thinking in terms of right or wrong as if for her such definitions no longer had any meaning. So life was a matter of improvisation and instinct, just as Catherine was now improvising an image for herself which would in the end become indistinguishable from reality. But if the image itself could not be supported

and the instinct faltered ... 'I like Sheila very much, you know. And I'm not fishing.'

Alan grinned. 'You are. And so do I.' Clearly he was not going to say more. Sheila came back into the room with her coat on. She looked strained. Olive wondered if she had been crying. 'I'd better go. I've checked the children, Olive. They're asleep.'

'Bless you.'

'Did Alan tell you about the cat?'

'What about the cat?'

'He really does seem very ill. He wouldn't eat and he's not breathing properly.'

'Poor old thing. I'll look at him.'

Alan was taking Sheila home. Olive sat for a while at the table. Tomorrow, she thought, I shall have a mild hangover I shall be too busy to notice and everything will slip back into place; the odd euphoric mood of the party, this cold misery which had overwhelmed her since the scene with Bob in the street, would melt away and she would simply carry on as usual. There were problems, certainly; if she allowed herself she could go half out of her mind with worry about Bob, but to help him the best she could do was never again to show her fears as she had tonight.

She heaved herself out of the chair and went to the scullery to look at the cat. Feeling she was betraying it, she had moved its box out of the kitchen with the vague idea that if it was ill it should not be in a room where food was prepared. Mrs. Armitage, on one of her rare visits, had announced that it should be put down, if not for its own sake, then for the baby's. Olive had laughed but she moved the box.

Sheila was right, it was worse. The temper had gone out of its gummy eyes, it was no longer dying in rage but meekly struggling merely to breathe. If it had been wild this was the moment when it would have gone off to die. It was a queer thought that you never found the bones of dead foxes or rabbits, even of birds. They were supposed to be unaware of mortality but in death they were infinitely discreet. In the war, and after the war in the hospital, Olive had seen deaths, but she had never seen an animal die and there seemed to her now something particularly appalling about the death of a domestic animal. Sentimentality, of course, about a creature that was neither a wild, self-sufficient beast nor a child; and yet one did have a responsibility, all

the more for having treated this creature badly, as a toy. But unlike a toy, it could not be repaired. The truth was, she felt ashamed before this animal. She could not kill it and she could not bear to live with it. So in the morning she would take it to the vet. It was struggling hard now, far beyond anything she could do for it. What was this blind urge to hold on to life? She was behaving like a foolish woman. She was projecting her own fears, imagining her own death.

Olive went upstairs to tell Bob that she would stay up for a while with the cat, but he was still in Willi's room, she could hear the murmur of their voices. How many times had she said to herself, Willi must go? Elizabeth's room was too small for two children and Paul woke her when he cried. Polly had said she would certainly find Willi somewhere else to live. There was this absolutely splendid couple, quite selfless, who had taken in several cases like Willi. They were expected to work, to pay a small rent, and every effort was made to readjust them to society. Olive found herself protesting quite hotly that Willi was not a 'case' and if he wanted to be a hermit why shouldn't he be a hermit?

There was a beam of light from the room. Olive paused, her knuckles against the door, but she did not go in. It would be perfectly normal to come up here looking for Bob; as a doctor Willi might even know what to do for the cat. But she could not go into Willi's room.

On the way down she looked in on the children and changed Paul. Sheila had fed him earlier and his taste was still milky. He had Bob's short, furry hair and already at two months a temperament so easy, so ready to be humoured, Olive found nothing but pleasure in him. Were children affected by the circumstances of their birth? She had wanted Paul, there had been no problems, and he had been born, it seemed, without the shadows which had appeared from the first as part of Elizabeth's nature. Elizabeth had never been much trouble, but in her character, as in the relationship with Olive, there was a promise, an echo from the future, of an intensity which might make life difficult for her, perhaps for both of them. Paul would always find love, Olive guessed; he would ask for it simply and receive it. Elizabeth, for all her independent airs, had in her the capacity for bloody-minded self-inflicted injury. Whatever happens, Olive thought, I must not feel guilty, and I must not,

must not try to protect her.

Olive moved the nightlight. Elizabeth opened her eyes.

'Go to sleep, love.' She bent to kiss her and Elizabeth touched her skirt and frowned.

'Funny stuff.'

'It's my party dress.'

Elizabeth did not approve. 'Funny stuff. Are you staying now?'

'Yes, I'm staying. Now go to sleep.'

Olive went downstairs. She kicked off her shoes, put an apron over her cocktail dress and washed out Paul's nappy. She hung the nappy on the line in the scullery. She washed the coffee cups and put them to drain. She laid the table for the morning, took off her apron, sat down by the cat's basket, remembered she had left her cigarettes in her apron pocket, got up to fetch them and lit one and realised that she had drifted all her life, she had drifted into marriage and good works, drifted by default into motherhood and into marriage again and into motherhood and she had the whole of her life on her back like a stone and it was all an improvisation. Good old Olive coped because it was easier to cope than to change, easier to drift than to remember.

Willi was upstairs remembering the history of the Jews because, he said, you must recognise your history before you can look forward.

Was it memory Bob saw in the shadows across the road? Instead of yelling like a bitch should she have gone along with him, tried to see what he saw? Well, then, we might both have been mad, she thought.

The bitch was interesting and not altogether dreadful. Dangerous instinct, and therefore the enemy of the one who coped. It was the bitch who had left Dennis Rawston, but it was also the bitch who was happy in the cellar with Bob, even though at any moment the roof might have caved in, filling their eyes with dust. Was the bitch now rebelling against the safe house? She still dared not ask herself if the house was, indeed, safe.

She dozed and woke, slumped in the chair she had dragged in from the kitchen, and suddenly all this seemed overwrought nonsense. She had drunk too much, that was all. She gulped water straight from the tap, saw that the cat was at last asleep, for a moment, its breath rattling in its throat, and went out into the garden. The apple tree shimmered in the darkness and she

looked up at her house. Her life was infinitely precious to her. The stupid, pregnant female who had gone running to Miss Fraser to ask if her husband who was mad was a child chasing after magic. The tree would bear fruit this year, the house would not fall and meanwhile Bob would recover and return to her, because anything else was unthinkable. Willi's light cast its loom as far as the apple tree. He was a nuisance; he was also their conscience and their memory burning at the top of the house. This was a bad season. It would pass, it must pass, or there was no point in living at all.

Alan had not meant to stay but he stayed and so they went to bed and so they made love as they had often done before. When Alan woke it was midnight and Sheila was sitting up smoking fiercely. She rarely smoked and when she did it indicated some crisis. This was unusual. While Alan had no standards to judge by, no idea how it should be, he knew that whenever she spread herself for him this was the only calm and certain place in his life. It was an illusion, but each time they spent an uncomfortable night in the narrow bed he felt that this was the still centre of the moving world, he could go anywhere from here.

'I wish you'd get a double bed.' He turned on his side, silly with content and with the next rising happiness; she'd cleaned sex for him, burned out the filth he'd been obliged to listen to night after night in the army, the sounds he'd heard from his parents' room as a child which had scared him more than their blazing rows. For so many years sex had meant violence, even fear as the boy had lain with the sheet stretched tight over his head, and he'd been at first over-anxious, nervous of hurting Sheila, of not pleasing her. It seemed impossible now that he had ever felt like this. Everything now was free and right between them. 'No guilt,' Sheila had said early on, 'whatever happens neither of us must ever feel any guilt.'

He smiled at the sight of her, bolt upright, breasts bared, staring straight ahead at her cigarette smoke. He said in a posh voice: 'I see you travel with your back to the engine.' He took her hand, turned it palm upwards and tasted the tender spot where the veins showed blue. Abruptly Sheila pulled the sheet up to her shoulders. 'Have you made up your mind? Are you going to work for David Wright?'

What was behind this? 'It's not settled. I'd like to but I'm

still not sure. I can't really see why he wants me.'

'Why shouldn't he? You're experienced. You did that army news-sheet. You're young but you're not silly. You agree with his aims. He needs you and I think you need him.'

'He doesn't need me in Korea or holed up somewhere as a deserter.'

'That's just an excuse!' Suddenly she began to cry, still sitting up, the tears simply falling out of her eyes. 'They haven't called you up and they probably never will. You can't go on like this, you can't live like this, going from one rotten job to another.'

Alan's impulse was to reach out and embrace her but he knew this would be a mistake. He was shattered. He had sensed that there was some strange mood behind her rage over Shuklov but whatever was brewing he hadn't expected this. He couldn't get out of bed without stepping over her and he felt idiotically trapped. He said quietly: 'The rotten jobs give me money and time to do what I want.'

'Reading, you mean? Learning Russian?'

'Reading, and learning Russian. And looking around, trying to find some way to live so that I can see my face in the mirror in the morning without throwing up. I told you what I felt when I came back to England. Unless you've been away you don't know what it's like, you can't really know because you've been part of it for so long. Oh, people are better off than when I went away, they aren't going on for ever about their lovely war, they aren't going on about anything, they've just holed themselves up.'

'David Wright hasn't holed himself up.'

'I don't know, I'm not sure even about him. Whatever he says, I'm not convinced you can bring about any change in the world without politics and I saw what politics could do when I was a kid—if there's one thing worse than politics it's religion. I should know, I was brought up with the Pope and Karl Marx. I couldn't stand either, the priest or my father's pals.'

Alan lay back, his arm across his eyes. Forgive me father, for I have sinned. His mother's deep white flesh, death already in her, buttoned up to deliver her sins like a shopping list, Alan scrubbed and polished bright as a new boot, aching to kick the smelly priest on the shins, who sent Moira to hell. Before she went she always expected to be shriven and she was soft, bitter

later. 'My mother really did believe in hell. That's funny, isn't it? She wasn't a stupid woman.'

Sheila said, not crying any more: 'Can't you see, you've got your head in the ground too, just as much as them? All this reading, all this talk about taking off and walking barefoot round the world, it's just another way of ducking the issue.' Her voice was flat and tired, almost toneless, as if she despaired of making him understand. She climbed out of bed and sat in the chair wrapped in her dressing-gown, her arms across her breast, hunched, although on this warm night she could not possibly have been cold. A woman would sit like that nursing a child, he reflected, and felt suddenly how hopeless it was for two people ever to communicate; in a way the closer you were to someone the more difficult it became ever to enter into the mystery of another personality. He knew more about that chap on the boat back from Malaya than he did about his own father. As for Sheila, maybe he'd simply and selfishly been overlooking the fact that she was a woman: and a woman of twenty-six would want a husband and children, she might no longer be satisfied with a happy love affair. The idea alarmed him but it also touched him more than he would have thought possible. He wanted to fling on his clothes and run and at that moment he could no more have left her than murdered her. So he pulled on his trousers and crouched down before her. She would not allow him to take her hands but neither did she draw away.

'What is it, Sheila, what's this all about?' She shook her head but he persisted: 'It's about us really, isn't it?'

'Partly, I suppose.'

'You want me to settle down.'

'No! That's not what I mean at all. I want you to wake up.'

A shamed, mean voice inside him said, when a woman talks about waking up she means marrying her and giving her children. But how could he marry when he hardly felt he'd been born yet?

'I'd better go.' He stood at the window, buttoning his shirt. It was midnight but a party was going on opposite, front door wide open, light flooding down the step, couples paddling and laughing in the light. He'd tried, she'd close herself against him and neither of them would speak of marriage.

'It's always like this,' she said, 'it happened to me before and

I've seen it happen to other people. You go on having a marvellous affair for months, even for years, then suddenly you have to change or the affair has to change or you break up. I don't know why, it doesn't make any sense at all, it doesn't seem to have anything to do with how happy you are or what you want or anything. Perhaps people just can't be happy for long without looking for trouble.'

Alan was ready to go. 'What happens then, when you reach this point?'

Sheila smiled. 'I don't know, I've never got beyond it.'

He fell in with her mood. 'And you the woman of the world seducing innocent young lads.'

'Oh me, I don't know anything except how little I know.'

'Well, that's a start,' he said. 'You're further on than me.'

He pecked her on the cheek and ran down the stairs, not sure whether or not he had broken with Sheila, but feeling perhaps he had. He was depressed and elated. He was free. He had nowhere to go. He sniffed the warm air. A dog put its leg up against a lamp-post and grinned at him, caught a smell and trailed off veering wildly. You and me, dog, he thought, following our noses.

11

THE day after Polly's party Olive had assumed she would resume her normal life, but this was not to be so. Even though she knew, perhaps because she knew, the cat would have to be destroyed in the morning she sat up with it most of the night. In the morning she wrapped it in an old cot blanket and carried it in a large shopping basket to the vet's. Only when she reached the surgery did she realise that she was still wearing her cocktail dress and having held the cat in her arms the dress was ruined. The animal was very quiet now and she remembered the vet's words a few months ago: even an animal can lose the will to live.

When she got home she had hoped to give Paul his bottle and sleep for half an hour but meeting Bob at the door, on his way to work, he said, 'Elizabeth was asking so I had to tell her. I'm afraid she's upset. You're worn out. Can't you get some sleep?'

The bitch replied. 'How would I do that?'

'You could ask your mother over?'

'Don't worry, I'll manage.' Her smile was tight. At four in the morning when Olive went upstairs to get some aspirin, Bob was still not in his bed. But he could walk out of this house.

She wore her painted smile. Elizabeth, who never cried, was yelling and screaming, purple in the face. She knocked her milk off the table. 'Where's cat?'

Olive explained gently that the cat would not be coming back. It was ill, it was tired, it had died. But Elizabeth was not to be fooled: Olive had taken it away so Olive had killed it, so Olive was not permitted to console her and all efforts at distraction failed. Here was the intensity, the latent hysteria in Elizabeth Olive had feared. The child screamed, would not eat and would not be touched, fought back with extraordinary strength when Olive tried to hold her. Olive fed and changed Paul and put him out in the garden in his pram. She poured herself some coffee and offered Elizabeth her cereal. Elizabeth brought her fist

down into the cereal, spilling it all over the table. Olive took the bowl to the sink and wiped the table. Elizabeth watched her, waiting for the next betrayal. Olive drank more coffee and opened the paper. More about the third man. MELINDA MACLEAN TO REJOIN HUSBAND? A long, favourable review of Shuklov's memoirs. Nice for Edward. Melinda Maclean, wife and mother, unlike Shuklov's wife, to rejoin husband. Elizabeth sat on the floor, hugging herself. She was very quiet now, too quiet. Olive looked at the picture of Melinda Maclean, a handsome, almost beautiful woman. Had she known all the time? If she had known how had she borne it? If she had not known she would certainly have sensed that her husband led a secret life. She must have suffered almost as much as Shuklov's wife yet Melinda Maclean was to rejoin husband. Olive washed up and carried the cocktail dress to the window. It was stained beyond cleaning. Incapable of thinking what to do with it, she stuffed it under the sink. She should ring Bob, explain about the bitch, how she understood about the secret life and could bear with it; emotionally fastidious, she of all people knew why he found it so hard to speak to her of his trouble. The telephone rang. Mrs. Armitage was glad to hear they had put the cat out of its misery, she might come over later; she wanted Olive's advice about the couple upstairs. Was she in her rights about banning the wireless after ten o'clock? She had little enough sleep. The telephone rang. Sheila Robbins wondered if by any chance Alan was there. No message, yes, she'd love to come over soon but things were a bit frantic ... A wistful tailing off. So the row brewing last night had come to the boil. Alan had dodged in this morning to shave and gulp a cup of tea and gone off to work. When the Festival job fell in he went back for a while to a radio shop then to a coffee bar. The telephone rang. The American from last night, Rowan, had got her number from Edward Carter, he hoped she didn't mind. His voice was shaky, he'd been thinking about what she said last night, *very* seriously and what he had decided was to chuck in the Shuklov interview and go back and throw out Marianne's bitch mother and her shrink. He rambled on, there was more stuff about Marianne and Shuklov, barely coherent, all mixed up with some Pentagon plot: he had proof, *absolute proof*, that two, if not three of the generals were certifiably mad and these generals were planning to use the atom bomb in Korea. The front door bell rang. Olive held the

telephone receiver away from her ear and heard Rowan buzz on. Olive? Olive, are you there? The bell rang again. Olive looked at the black telephone. It was an insect. Marianne rejoins husband. Olive laid the telephone down in its cradle, cutting off Rowan. Olive was not prepared to help Rowan remember. Paul yelled. A pretty girl at the door told Olive the world would end in 1972. If Olive had a moment she would like to discuss the end of the world. I'm sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. No time, so busy, so tired. The telephone rang. Olive watched the black insect die. Elizabeth wobbled towards her and flung her arms around her mother's legs. Mummy's going to lie down for a bit. Upstairs. We'll get another cat tomorrow. Bob will get another cat. Curled on the bed against Olive, at last Elizabeth cried naturally and slept.

When Olive woke the first thing she saw was a crack across the ceiling. Abruptly, she decided that they must get away from this house not for a few hours but for weeks, a week at least. She was beginning to see omens. Domestic problems she could have perfectly well coped with had assumed absurd proportions, which was a sign that she needed a change. This house was right for her, she needed it, but just for the moment she should get away from it, to become again the one who coped. Except to have Paul, she had not left this house since she had been married. On her small excursions into the outer world the house had followed her, as in a children's magic story.

By the time Bob came home she had put the children to bed early, bathed, changed and taken the telephone off the hook. After an hour or two the Post Office would put on the bleeper or send a van round to accuse her of taking the telephone off the hook. Meanwhile Olive washed up, made coffee and caught Bob before he could sneak upstairs to Willi. 'I've been thinking we should have a holiday.'

Bob agreed. But he wasn't sure he could leave Jack. And where could they go?

'Mavis won't die this week. No one can help Jack. We can't spend our lives waiting for Mavis to die.' She was determined not to alarm him but in the end she admitted. 'I haven't been feeling well.' The house was pressing in on her, she had to get out, but she persuaded him that all she needed was a change of air, a week in the country?

Bob said yes, it was possible, they couldn't afford anything grand but they could go to Patrick and Enid Green's. This was a cottage in Sussex belonging to friends, somewhere they had spent a weekend before they were married.

'You're right, perhaps we both need a change.'

The image of the house he had seen walking back from the party blurred with Bob's picture of the cottage. A return to primal innocence? Nothing so simple but it was something, more than he had expected, to be forced to work with his hands and then when he could have stopped to continue because he chose to. Having cleaned the wicks on the oil lamps and washed the globes, chopped wood for the fire—the house needed airing and besides evenings in the country were still chilly—he set to digging the neglected garden. He had never imagined he was a countryman at heart and had no illusions about the rural life and yet turning the earth he found himself fascinated by the layers it revealed: flints on the surface to be chucked away, a dry crust, then the heavy, sticky soil of this area which threw up treasures. Elizabeth pounced on and carried away blue fragments of pottery, rusty horse-shoes, a broken wooden doll, its face wiped off. Below the subsoil was the clay which was unworkable and held its secrets.

Bob leant on his spade. He was tired but for the time he was off the wheel, as he had come to think of the cycle of self-questioning to which he was pinned. In London he had really begun to imagine he might be going off his head. Perhaps he was, but out here at least he no longer found himself watching for manifestations. Three broad fields away, silhouetted against the placid sky, a figure appeared on the crest of the downs and then plunged into the scrub, descending. It was only a figure, a man on a walk.

Each time he chopped wood he heard the ringing axe scream: break! break! His knuckles bled from carting stones. 'Look at your poor hands!' Olive said and he had not even noticed that he was bleeding.

Elizabeth was humming at her treasures, rocking them in her lap. Children, before they were spoiled, had this natural sense of history, they were interested in their roots. Experience overlaid the simplicity of such excavations. Jack was right; what was the point in going back to Essex? All dead, the cross roads probably

gone by now, it would all be some bloody jam factory.

Olive came out of the cottage and said she'd got someone to sit with Paul, so why didn't they all go for a walk? She brought a mug of tea for Bob and sat on a log while he knocked the soil off the spade.

He took the mug. 'What are you grinning at?'

'You. Son of the soil. I only hope the Greens are grateful.'

Bob smiled. 'They won't even notice. Enid's a slut and Patrick doesn't know a cow from a tram. This was one of their intellectual enthusiasms before they discovered they were communists. They were solemn as pie about it once—growing pure food and home-weaving and everything. They don't come much now but they keep it up for the kids. That's what they say. I think myself they see it as some kind of last resort, a bivouac.'

'That's reasonable. We may all be living off the land before we're through.'

'You sound very cheerful about it?'

She stood, leaning against a tree, the empty mug in her hands. 'I honestly don't think I'd mind. That makes me some kind of a monster, I suppose? Assuming we had survived an atomic disaster.'

'No more than Shuklov or the Greens or anyone else.'

Olive stared down at the mug as if she could read something in the leaves. 'You don't believe in putting down roots, do you?' she said, but without acrimony. 'Yet, you're finding it hard to leave the Party. I'd have agreed with you once. Now I understand Enid Green. Everyone needs some kind of bivouac.'

And mine is the Party, Bob thought. After all there was not so much difference between a woman wanting a safe house and a man who cannot break the cord with the Party. Any party, so long as it would shelter you? There must be more to it than that. Stalinism repelled him but there had been something once, a brilliant idea. A party is no more than the individuals of which it is composed. So it is up to the individual to change the party! A pathetically simple concept, but it struck him with the thunder of a revelation. After all it seemed possible that he could go in with David Wright without breaking with the Party.

Then almost at once he realised he was being simple minded. This was the way his brain worked nowadays, veering between optimism and utter despair.

Climbing between the trees with Elizabeth on his shoulders, his mood lifted again. Most of the time, panting a little, they simply climbed, glancing up every so often for a glimpse of the Ring. The path between the thickening green was almost a tunnel though there were sudden vistas like windows. Once, far above them, Bob thought he saw a figure coming down—the same he had noticed, perhaps, from the garden. Ahead, Olive's blue dress was swinging through the trees, then she stopped and called out, 'Do come on, there's a marvellous view. Look!'

Most of the trees were scrubby and quite a few had some kind of blight but here was a nearly perfect spot: a mossy shelf, like a room, walled with straight, grey-boled beeches, open, where Olive was sitting, her arms round her knees, to a picture of the plain below. But as Bob swung Elizabeth down from his shoulders it was Olive he took in before the view. She looked so happy. A sunny day and a fine view had made her happy when he could not. For so long he had felt shameful, as he had that winter's night when he watched her through the window, that for all her surface optimism she was vulnerable and lonely. It would take so little to make her happy, it was in his power, and it was so simple, and he couldn't take the simple ordinary step of loving her as she should be loved, in an ordinary, everyday way. He had said once, to Olive, that he despised happiness, the pursuit of happiness was the worst bloody phrase ever coined. Now he wondered how he could ever have taken such a simple view.

'Look,' she said, 'you can see the cottage. And there's the road. I'd never realised it was in a valley. It looks so safe, doesn't it? You can't imagine anything bad happening there. But of course it does.'

Bob tried to share her vision. He saw cottages, farms and a village basking smugly in the sun. From here you could hardly make out the road so in the right mood you could really take it for an earthly paradise; as Olive said, it was hard to believe violence or brutality could ever penetrate this spot.

Why then did he find the view of the plain painful, when Olive got so much simple pleasure from it? Because, like that house they had seen on the way back from the party, it was an hallucination, for bad things did happen here as they happened everywhere? Or because, while some forgotten part of him responded to it intensely and with yearning, he could no more

make himself part of such a tranquil scene than he could walk into a picture?

Bob felt suddenly restless and got to his feet. 'We'd better go on if we're going to get to the Ring.'

Olive smiled. 'I feel lazy. It's so lovely here.'

'Why don't you stay? It'll only take me twenty minutes.'

'You don't mind? You'd get on quicker without Elizabeth.'

'I'll give your love to the Ring.'

Towards the summit the path closed in and he had to duck under the branches. There were no windows here. There was a crashing and slithering noise from above and for the first time since he had got away from London Bob was afraid again of the formless and the nameless. Bob had never been introspective. As far as he thought about himself at all he had believed himself to be a rational man. If he had a passion, it was reason. His attitude to violence, the reversal of this attitude, his long faithful years as a communist, had been deeply felt, even passionately felt, but based on reason. Once, when sex had failed to heal the raw wounds they made between them, Moira had flung at him, 'You think you're above all us lot. You're not *human*!'

All those years of grinding wearily towards a revolution that never came, struggling to hold on to the essence of himself through war and a ruined marriage, had they robbed him of some important human element? Was nature, not pretty, but savage in neglect, now taking her revenge?

He was sweating coldly now wondering what shape the unspeakable would take when he burst out of the scrub at the summit and saw the Ring and a hiker taking the other, quick route down to the road. The relief was absurd. Stumbling on up to the Ring, Bob was light-headed with thankfulness and only then realised that he had been walking with his fists tightly clenched, his whole body prepared to resist the creature coming down on him through the trees; yet he could not have resisted, he knew that, nor could he have fled.

From the Ring you could not see the valley. A lark fell out of the sky and on the horizon the sea flashed a signal. Bob felt elated but feeble from the after-effects of his scare. He was physically weak. Looking out to sea he saw a smudge, a freighter he guessed, trail slowly east. The Ring was the only sizeable clump of trees on this side of the hill, yet no birds sang there. Suddenly he felt it would be fatal to sit down and rest.

Once he was back at the cottage he would get a grip on himself.

Over the next couple of days he did begin to feel calmer. He cleared a good patch of ground and drove to the nearest market town to get seed potatoes which he planted by way of a thank you present for the Greens. He brought back provisions and newspapers.

The papers were still full of the Burgess and Maclean story. Olive skimmed them in bed and pushed them aside. 'I know it sounds like Polly,' she said, 'but if there were a war between Britain and Russia, which side would you be on?'

'The Party line is that Russia would never be the aggressor.'

'And you believe the Party line?'

'No.'

Olive nodded Bob knew what she was thinking. If he felt like that, why didn't he break with the Party. But she leaned on one elbow and studied him.

'You're looking better.'

'I feel better.'

'I'm not nagging, but do you think when we get back you'd be happier with something to do? Apart from the garage, I mean?'

'You're probably right.'

He lay awake long after she had gone to sleep. He felt healthier, pleasantly aimless, but he knew and felt sure Olive sensed, that beneath the aimlessness he was coming to some decision. He had been used for long enough, why not use someone else for a change? He had to admit that communism had not been his whole life for many years. Nor, apparently was he ready to be an entirely private man. Blind obedience no longer attracted him, it was only a matter of time before he tore up his card, but it would be something at least to work again with people who believed that action wasn't altogether futile. He began to wonder if it was not necessary to break, after all.

The next day they left the children with a girl from the farm and walked beyond the Ring. There were no fences, no ghosts or terrors, simply an old flint track.

They ate their sandwiches sitting on the springy turf with their backs against the ruins of an old house or barn, roofless. They pondered vaguely what it had been, why it had fallen into neglect.

Olive stood up and looked around. 'It really is perfect, isn't it.' She explored the ruins, which had apparently been a house, calling out whenever she identified a room. Then she said. 'I'm just going to see what's over the hill. The view should be even better from there.'

Bob rested, watching her idly. For some reason today had reached him, he no longer felt cut off. He studied a beetle mountaineering up the side of a warm stone; now he looked closer the earth teemed with life. He picked up a flint and found that it exactly fitted the palm of his hand. This pleased him absurdly. Perhaps all he had needed was a holiday The pressure he had endured, the idea that he was being forced to come to some decision, had never existed except in his own mind! Outside the context of his panic no decision he might make had the slightest significance. Since the earth was apparently destined to become a dead planet, to die by its own hand, why not accept your powerlessness? You reached a point where you understood at last what Olive meant: you couldn't go on for ever listening to portents of the world's end. This must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. What mattered was not that it might be swept away by some blundering idiot but that it had existed.

Olive called out sharply: 'No!' Still weighing the flint in his palm Bob climbed up slowly to join her. In the middle of nowhere, behind a triangle of barbed wire and a War Department notice a patch of grass was fenced in. Mines? Some hideous new experiment? Neither of them spoke for a moment, then Olive said, with dry disgust, 'Even here.'

'You can't get away from it, can you?'

'It's obscene.'

'Come on. Let's go down.'

By the end of the week Bob told Olive, he had decided to go in with David Wright. And if Larry Towers didn't like it, he could lump it.

Bob listened and gave advice. Rather to his surprise he was caught up in the idea of the peace group. It was a relief, like planting potatoes, to deal with practical problems for a change.

The first meeting Bob attended was held in the small front room of David Wright's own house, walking distance from the Wilsons'. When Bob rang him David Wright had shown no

surprise but simply said, 'Well, you'd better come along tonight.' At the door Bob nearly turned back. What in the world was he doing here? Never for a moment did he imagine that a small non-aligned group like this could achieve anything. He had refused to have anything to do with the C.P. peace campaign (another black mark for him in Larry Towers' book) and now here he was involving himself in an amateur enterprise he knew to be doomed from the start. Looking up at the dreary little terrace house he was gripped by a sudden and bitter weariness. Even before he entered he knew what the atmosphere would be. He had spent so much of his life in rooms like this and not one of all the plots he had laid, the words he had spilled, written and spoken, had altered the world one jot. All that mattered to him nowadays was his family. So why wasn't he at home with his family?

Still hesitating, he lingered on the pavement when someone spoke his name. A girl in a thin raincoat had come up behind him and was propping a bicycle against the railings. 'Mr. Wilson? I'm Sheila Robbins.' She seemed tentative, as if she had not expected him to recognise her. 'Perhaps you don't remember me?'

'Of course. You came to the house with Alan.' It was an effort to respond but he smiled. He did remember, and both he and Olive had liked her. Now he came to think of it, she hadn't been to the house for some time, not since the night of the Carters' party.

'That's right.' She opened the door, which was propped on the latch, and assumed he was following. So he followed. Obviously she had been here before because she led the way straight into the front room.

Once, about fifty years ago when the house was built, this would have been the parlour, hardly used. Now it was a shabby, all-purpose family room—a study, dining room and nursery. Bottles of salad cream and sauce stood on a heavy sideboard. There was a stack of toys in one corner, many of them broken, and a child's high-chair. The ugly gate-legged table round which half a dozen people were sitting obviously doubled as David Wright's desk.

The meeting had not yet begun and there was a murmur of talk. As they squeezed into the last two places left David Wright came in, greeted Bob briskly and introduced him then got down

at once to business. Bob had recognised by sight a couple of the committee: a journalist Olive knew vaguely and an actor who occasionally gave mime and movement classes at the Institute. There was also a clergyman, a schoolmaster and a married couple whose names Bob had not caught.

Half reluctantly he found himself impressed again by David Wright. He kept the meeting in order but offended no one, fielding foolish propositions and drawing out anyone with something useful to contribute. Obviously, he was not as naive as he had first appeared to Bob. Anyone tending to make a high-flown speech was cut off. Possibly he might even be a sceptic. Maybe an energetic sceptic was exactly what this kind of movement needed. Dreamers were no use any more, that was certain. Only a sceptic was capable of recognising that compromise with a lesser evil was better than total failure. At least David Wright would never break, never find himself like Tim Connor skinning his fists against an implacable wall.

The journalist, Peter Price, was passing round a dummy of *Pax*, the news-sheet which was to come out for the first time this summer. They had backing, apparently, from a left-wing industrialist and the promise of a small office at a minimal rent. Price was especially proud of the centre spread: a map showing the extent of damage if an atom bomb were to be dropped on London. Sheila Robbins made a suggestion about layout. Price nodded. Everyone waited for David Wright's verdict.

'It's good,' he said, 'but I'd like to scrap the editorial.'

Price looked injured. 'I thought it struck about the right note.'

'It does. And it's been used in half a dozen left-wing papers over the last five years.' Wright looked wistful. 'What we really need for a kick-off is statistics. You know, the numbers of those who have already been maimed and killed, the numbers who would be crippled and blinded, that sort of thing. But I suppose figures like that are hard to come by?'

'Nothing easier.'

'Well then, that's how we'll do it. If we're all agreed?'

Bob asked about distribution, the first time he had spoken. Was there a danger of preaching to the converted? It was easy enough to reach the universities and the professional middle classes but what about factories, industry, the docks?

He agreed to draw up a list of suggested outlets. Half an hour later the meeting broke up. Bob was just about to leave when

David Wright looked up from some notes he was discussing with Peter Price. 'Stay a moment, won't you? We'll be having coffee.' Price left. Sheila came in with a tray. The actor was relaying maliciously, with impersonations, some theatre gossip. Bob stood in a corner, smoking, and watched. Nice people, decent enough people, intentions impeccable, bellies full, genuinely and sincerely trying to save the world from its folly, as if they could, because if they didn't at least try they would be disgusted with themselves. Oh, Tim, my ginger man, warm mad Tim, you'd be as out of place here as a tiger at a tea party. In his heyday Larry Towers would have eaten you all for breakfast. And my father, that famous political agitator, for whom politics, that is to say communism, were meat, drink, life, and but for the odd forgetful moment, sex; which was just as well since meat, drink and life itself were on the short side round about my father's time.

My father was off his head but he was all right. Go back a bit. What would the old man say to this lot? Nothing, most likely. The old man died. He got a hernia humping barrels and he died, my grandfather, sitting up and cursing the brewer. Young Bob in Essex still sees life as a picture. Grandad is gutting a few silver fish in the tarred shed. 'Can I come out with you tomorrow, Grandad?' 'Mind the sea, boy, she's a bitch.' If it wasn't the brewer it was the sea and if it wasn't the sea it was the hens. So much for the simple life.

Jack was right. Why go back? There was no bivouac there.

David Wright came up with a cup of coffee. 'What do you think of us, then?'

Bob smiled. 'That was a neat job you did on Price. Now he'll do as you say because he thinks he wants to'

'I didn't realise it was so obvious. He's writing a novel, you know.' Wright was all bland innocence. Alan said he'd been in a Jap camp. From what Bob had heard that was the ultimate in walls. You died or you changed or you broke. Mostly you broke. 'He has problems.'

'I still don't know what you want me for?'

'I thought you might speak.'

'I'm not sure.'

'Well think about it then?' Wright turned away to deal with some problem, patiently, giving or appearing to give the matter his whole attention. The woman with the notebook seemed en-

tirely satisfied. He has acquaintances, Bob thought, followers and colleagues, but has he a single friend? Why does he surround himself with young people, learn Russian, why does his wife look so tired? 'Well,' David Wright continued and he looked as happy as he had in the snow last winter, 'what is your opinion of the magazine? We've been arguing about paper for months, but I really believe it might come out.' He went on about the newsprint restrictions; he had clearly enjoyed every battle with bureaucracy.

'It's good. But you'll have to deal with the Korean question sometime.'

'Do you think so?'

'I don't see how you can ignore it.'

'We are hoping to steer clear of politics.'

'Then you're not living in the world.'

Walking home through the cold spring evening, every week, all that season, Bob found himself looking, against all reason, compulsively, for the cottage and the woman in the blue apron. But it must have been demolished because he never saw it again.

12

'DAMN! It's broken.' Olive crouched to pick up the scraps of china. A Staffordshire cup Dennis Rawston's father had given her. She had admired it so her father-in-law had given it to her and she had taken it even in the rush of packing when, with Elizabeth newly born, she had fled with Bob like refugees half down England. Leaving her husband who had fought Bob in the small, rainbound kitchen and Bob had not fought back, had even tended Dennis. Mr. Rawston had referred to his love for his dead wife as an extraordinary thing, the most extraordinary thing. In the train on the way down she had been amused by their matching black eyes: Bob's from the one-sided battle, hers from weariness. They had looked like survivors of a war, which they were. The china was sharp. She cut her finger and as the blood spurted she thought, I loved my father-in-law, I have missed him every day and now he is dead. That's finished.

But nothing is ever finished. The dead possess us. Melinda Maclean has rejoined husband, people look cheerful, Polly is pregnant, we have pitched our tents but how that bloody war goes on and on. Meat shorter than ever before yet the city grows, makes itself again, we run for cover. Revolution is walled up with Tim Connor but it doesn't take much imagination to see that you can go mad indoors; there's nothing new about that. People have always gone mad in houses. Rowan was wrong only in thinking that the signs were new, that they had not always blazed in the sky for anyone to see.

We run for cover and receive signals from the outside: pictures, messages, scraps of other lives overheard. Scenes from a Korean winter on Polly's television set. A bridge explodes. Refugees cross the frozen river, screaming with cold. 'Those children.' Polly murmurs, 'I keep thinking about those children'; but her hand creeps like a mouse to her belly and soon she is talking of something more cheerful. Polly, Olive and Catherine drink tea in Polly's handsome first-floor sitting room.

Even Polly doesn't have drawing rooms any more. Sam comes to collect Catherine and Catherine waits, smiling, for him to fetch her coat; it is Sam who ties the blue bows on Danny's coat and carries him down. Olive wonders, why do Jews love their sons so much? Sam's passion for his son has taken away his power. Well, Catherine's better, that's something. Her possession is so far brittle but she will polish and perfect it until the improvisation becomes the reality, or as near as makes no difference. Olive is fascinated by the textures of Polly's house. She stands at the window, her cheek brushing the raw silk curtains and sees Sam's big magic car slide silently away, a vessel for his wife and child. A chauffeur nowadays, no less! Well, there would be money in architecture, this is the time for building and however hallucinatory the regeneration cities do not spring from the earth overnight. Polly comes back into the room. Elizabeth and Paul are somewhere below with the woman-who-does.

Olive remarks how much building is going on. 'I got lost the other day. A whole street had gone and there were these frightful offices.'

Polly smiles vaguely. 'It is awful, isn't it'; as if she ever went anywhere on foot. One walks in the country but not in town. Though Edward had once admitted to Olive, shyly, confessing to a perversion, that he often walks to the office in St. James's.

Olive says, 'There must be little men who get up in the night to move it all around.'

Polly plumps up the cushions. Someone else, the one-who-does, will empty the ashtrays. What is it like, Olive wonders, to be Polly alone? How can anyone live with so many things? 'No, I'd better not stay for a drink. Bob will be back. This really is a lovely house.' It is. Olive thinks she'd go mad here in twenty-four hours flat.

At the door Polly dismisses it all. 'Things don't matter really, do they?'

'Only when you haven't got them.'

'Yes.' Paul is wriggling like an eel in Olive's arms. Suddenly Olive wants to be on the bus, worn out, tired, cross, warm, but Polly is pleading. 'I mean, if there's something you really want, nothing else counts, does it?' Polly picks up an ornament, a jade figure, puts it down. Olive wonders why people always tell her things, all those friends and strangers crossing deserts to unload

upon her their most private and secret sorrows. A woman stopped her in the street only a week ago, someone she had never seen before in her life, to tell her that she was dying of a fatal illness and this was a sign: God had cursed these times and would bring his plague upon them. Polly goes on, and her fullness is somehow desolate. 'You're so lucky. You've got everything.'

Everything? And so indeed I have. My husband won't talk to me, that's all. He's in some deep trouble and he won't or can't, speak of it. We've glossed over that. But in marriage you never know if you've healed a wound or buried a bomb. He seems so much better lately—the holiday must have done him good and he's admitted he enjoys the job on the committee. And yet there is something violent working beneath the surface, as mysterious and as potentially disastrous as that triangle of grass on the downs.

'Do you have days when you break things?'

Signals. This morning a long typewritten airmail letter from the American, Rowan, single-spaced and the type scrawled across by hand, barely decipherable, so frantic. I nearly married an American but Harold was really a European. Rowan is for us in England like a creature from outer space, inextricably bound up with the fate of his country. Half of it made no sense at all, ramblings, paranoid delusions, the only concrete information that the reunion had failed (Marianne does not rejoin husband), and Rowan too now had his own analyst. Though not, of course, Marianne's analyst. The analysts agreed that Marianne should break with her husband but she should not go back to her mother. So Rowan and Marianne lived in the same block in separate apartments. The letter was a howl, a cry of pain. I put it away in a drawer, dry-eyed.

News of Dulcie Connor living in the country with her children like the old woman in the shoe. Dulcie's a heroine. I have not the courage to see her. Husband, mad with love for fellow men, will not rejoin Dulcie.

Mary Owens bangs down the telephone. She'd bite the cord in half to keep Chris to herself. The telephone rings almost at once. Mrs. Armitage really doesn't see how she can go on like this, the noise all day and all night. If Olive could come over? Well, I've only just got in and Bob will be back soon. A hairline

crack in the plaster by the door. Olive, the telephone like a bomb in her hand: break. Break or change!

'It's no good, I'm simply too old to change. That's all there is to it.' Having made her statement, Mrs. Armitage glanced sideways at her daughter to see how she had taken it.

Olive forced herself to look directly at her mother. For the first time it struck her, not as an intellectual concept but with the force of a blow to the stomach, that Mrs. Armitage *was* old, she *was* tired. Behind all their conversations nowadays (trivial: Olive did her best to keep them trivial) ran the same thread—Mrs. Armitage could not live alone much longer. She still had her good days. But they were fewer and although catastrophe held off there was a series of minor accidents. A pan of boiling water overturned and the purple scar remained on her leg: a portent. Far from fading, it grew more intense, more obscene, though to her credit Mrs. Armitage did not speak of it. She cut her hand opening a tin and the wound did not heal. She went to the doctor because she could not sleep, accepted pills and refused to take them. She showed them to Olive, little yellow torpedoes. 'At least I haven't sunk *that* low!' But she did not throw them away. She kept them in a bottle, a threat? A way out of an intolerable survival? Olive refused to worry about the pills. Whatever happened to Mrs. Armitage, she would never kill herself.

Olive reminded herself of the truce she had made in her own mind with her mother. She had kept to this truce over a long period. She had told herself it was irrational to regard Mrs. Armitage as the enemy. She was a lonely old woman and to break with her would be not only unreasonable but wantonly cruel. If resentment throbbed still, even though it rarely broke out nowadays, then that resentment was a shortcoming in Olive herself, a shadow of some guilt she dare not face. There was a connection here with her attitude to Willi, and the common factor was guilt. Caged by guilt, she simply was not free to admit any honest straightforward feelings she might have for her mother or for Willi.

She walked to the window. Although it was late spring now, almost summer, an icy wind had whipped up and people in the street walked quickly, hurrying home, toppling against it. A woman at a bus stop, well dressed, was talking to herself; Olive

could not hear her but she could see her lips move. How self-absorbed we all are now, she thought, turning back to catch the end of Mrs. Armitage's complaint. My mother is merely franker about it. The rest of us—my generation at least—live in houses, visit each other's houses, make protests of affection and interest, but it's like the Japanese theatre: we put up images, masks of convenience. The woman at the bus stop was nodding now in vehement agreement with herself or with the ghosts that inhabited her.

The woman appeared not to notice that behind her back a bombed row of terrace houses was being demolished and a block of flats put up in their place. All that remained of the houses were their façades, like a stage set. Half the row was cleared and already, since Olive's last visit a week ago, the flats were springing up. The men came back from their tea-break and immediately the noise crashed in waves against the glass, the room trembled and it was impossible to speak without shouting.

Apparently it was like this all day then at night there was the wireless upstairs. Mrs. Armitage showed Olive a brochure for a home for retired gentlewomen. It turned out she had a drawerfull of such papers. She had been writing round. What did Olive think?

Olive wondered how it was possible to feel for one person at the same time such pity and such hate. If she truly pitied her mother she would throw Willi out and let Mrs. Armitage move in; if she really hated her, with the courage of her convictions, she would simply walk out and never come back. Catherine had done this, so had Chris. Yet Olive does not break with mother.

Last time Mrs. Armitage came to see Olive she left her handbag. The time before it was her library book and her spectacles. She was establishing a bridgehead.

Olive was determined not to add to Bob's worries so she gave Polly a brief, edited sketch of the situation. In talking, she realised that what she really wanted to discuss was not her mother's position but her own reaction to it. 'I suppose there's no reason why we shouldn't have her for a week or two . . .'

Polly took the whole thing much too seriously. Olive wanted someone to laugh at her, to tell her that Mrs. Armitage was simply blackmailing her. But Polly, who knew everything, said some of these homes were very well run, the old people got the

best possible care from those who really understood their needs. There was one not far from here. 'I'm on the committee. Let me know if you want me to fix it for you. They have their own rooms and the visiting hours are very reasonable.'

Olive's only response was helpless laughter. It had nothing to do with reason, nothing at all; it was Willi all over again. Polly was offended. She was only trying to help. She refused a drink. They were sitting in the kitchen. Olive poured herself a glass of cooking sherry and gulped it like medicine. 'Have you never felt guilty, Polly, in your life?'

'Of course I have, but I don't dwell on it.' Polly was wrapt in her fullness, she was beyond reach.

'Did you know Dulcie Connor is living in a bus, with all those kids?'

'That was a long time ago, wasn't it.'

When Polly had left in a mild huff, it occurred to Olive, stranded in her safe house, that guilt could be, if you allowed it, more powerful than love or hate, guilt accounted for everything, when you came to think of it, even for the persecution of the Jews.

She mentioned this to Bob, idly, as if the thought had just come into her head. He was working on some papers for the committee at the kitchen table while Olive cooked. He needed spectacles now, though only for reading. He had said nothing, simply gone to work one morning and come home in the evening with spectacles. He's not so young, Olive thought, with a pang, he'll get old and he'll die. The unmentioned spectacles were a small, absurd instance of a whole secret, inner life he led away from her. He seemed so much better but he was still in danger, she felt, and this danger which should have brought them together came between them. The best she could do for him, she knew, was to wait, never to show her fear. Yet she *was* afraid. Communication on the most everyday, banal level became vital to her, a fragile thread across the gap, a sign that nothing had irrevocably changed, that life was normal. Which was why she produced her theory about the Jews.

He nodded reasonably. They were so reasonable nowadays. To the world, and even to themselves, they presented a united front. 'You could be right.'

'I hope I'm not.' She grinned, feeling foolish, feeling she had been naïve. 'I'd rather have some good straightforward hate.'

She jabbed at the onions. Her eyes stung.

'What about some whisky instead?'

'Whisky!'

'Jack came up with a bottle.'

She turned the gas down low and they drank, making a small ceremony of it in the sitting room where the evening sun showed up how tight the skin was drawn around his eyes. He had a new habit, which came with the spectacles, of rubbing his hand all over his face as if trying to wipe something away, or to recognise himself.

Olive enjoyed the bite of the whisky. She swung her feet up on to the sofa. 'You know, I could easily become an alcoholic.'

'You couldn't. You're a Puritan.'

She closed her eyes against the gold of the sun, which was too rich. 'Which accounts I suppose for my preoccupation with guilt? Then I'll become a guilty alcoholic. Speaking of Jack, how's Mavis?'

'She's going into hospital again next week. Tests. There may be another operation.'

'Poor Mavis, I wish I liked her better.' Bob nodded and took her hand. We might both be dying, she thought, we treat each other so well. Such consideration. We fetch things for one another like children bringing toys. Are you comfortable? Do you have a headache? Are you made of glass? Will you break?

Bob topped up her glass. 'Where's that cup we used to have on the shelf?'

'I broke it. I keep breaking things.'

He was being dutiful, letting her have her mood out. 'As long as you don't break your neck.'

'Give me time.'

He took away her glass and kissed the tips of her fingers. He loomed above her, a large man in a small room. 'I should be saying that.'

'Rubbish. You're better. You're sleeping better, aren't you?'

'You don't mind?' He meant they had not made love for two months For six weeks after Paul's birth it had not been possible, then somehow it had simply not happened. Olive learned to contain the bitch though sometimes the one-who-coped spoke out, against her will, in the bitch voice. She always made up for it with little kindnesses which he seemed to appreciate, but from a distance, like a man stretched on a rack recognising a

friend he has once known. Once they stroked each other and shuddered together but that was lonelier than chastity.

Well, they could still signal. They discussed Alan who had apparently announced to David Wright that he was prepared to help Peter Price with the news-sheet and if he had to turn up to committee meetings he would, but he'd rather not. With his work on the news-sheet and in the coffee bar they hardly saw him. He had been to one meeting Bob attended but ducked out before it finished. Bob said, 'I gather he's broken with Sheila Robbins.'

'That's a pity. Do you think we ought to worry about him? I'm sure he doesn't get enough to eat, working those weird hours.'

'I don't think we've the right to. I haven't anyway.'

The bitch said sharply, before she could stop herself, 'So we give him up, just like that?'

'He's giving us up. He resents me being on the committee, I can see that.'

Olive protested, 'But that's absurd.'

Bob smiled. 'Not so absurd. He suspects my motives, and rightly. The best thing I could do for Alan would be to fade quietly out of the picture.'

Suddenly Olive felt sure. 'You're wrong. It's some kind of showdown he wants. I think half the reason he's quarrelling with Sheila is because we made it quite obvious we liked her. It's natural. He wants to be free and at that age you imagine that being free is being reborn, stark naked, without any attachments.' The memory came back to her in a flood so powerful she could hardly bear it. 'I felt the same once and I'm sure you did. Then when I had Elizabeth, I thought, I *knew* that she would come to hate me, quite calmly, quite coldly I felt that. I suppose I should have left her outside a police station but the moment you recognise them it's too late to set them free. Freedom doesn't work, anyway, Polly was right, for once.'

'I can't believe that.' That would make nonsense of his whole life. Yet, when he came to think about it, he had never been free.

Olive picked up her drink and swallowed thirstily. She thought of Rowan and Marianne screaming silently in separate rooms in the same apartment block. Did they meet in the lift? There was a child, she had forgotten. Doubtless the child had

an analyst now. Oh my God.

The bitch was also instinct. The bitch understood Rowan's child standing wide-eyed in the lift between the polite four legs of its parents; Elizabeth's bad dreams, the child dying now in Alan.

It's the end when you start getting sentimental about people you've never met. 'Are you hungry?' Are you warm, cold? She woke in the night, simply to hear him breathing, like a spy. She looked at him, the man with the short cropped hair and large intelligent hands, made for action, in Gaza.

'Are you?'

'I suppose we ought to eat.' Only starving. 'I'm feeling rather cheerful as a matter of fact.' Not dying, just starving. If he had a mistress it couldn't be worse than this.

The bitch would now at this moment have followed her instinct and gone even into the dark with him, disregarding competent smiling Olive with the glass in her hand, was about to say something of the sort, had reached out in the most desperate gesture of her life as if this immeasurable gulf between them could actually be leaped, as though the bleak, absolute solitariness of human existence could be denied and overcome; then Elizabeth appeared in her spotted pyjamas, asleep on her feet, reeling. This was normal. This was how one lived. Elizabeth was thirsty, that was all.

13

In June Mrs. Armitage came to stay for a few weeks and the first issue of *Pax* was published, to a resounding silence. In a Soho restaurant with Bob, David Wright and a few others from the committee, Olive felt uncomfortably hot and hoped to be left out of the conversation. She was smoking too much and thinking how little one knew of other people's lives. The interesting moment, the one that fascinated novelists, she supposed, was the fleeting second when the crack appeared and the real person looked fearfully out: Polly crying in the kitchen, Rowan's frantic signals. Tim. Well, poor Tim was real now all of the time.

Everyone was talking at once, no one was listening to anyone else. Bob is trying to find his reality with these people, Olive thought, and wished she felt more hopeful about the outcome.

'What about you, Olive?'

She was confused, smiling apologetically. 'I don't know.'

'We only want to know what you'd like to eat.'

'Oh, anything. Whatever you're having.'

'We're all having different things.'

'Well then ...' David Wright's nervous wife was framed against the setting sun. She seemed to be burning. She opened her handbag and shut it, opened her handbag and shut it. Her clothes were pathetic, home-made, badly cut, yet far too grand for this modest restaurant. A shrieking green, low-cut satin blouse exposed pale pink shoulder straps. Olive, sipping her wine while the others chattered happily, was appalled. She smiled at her own unreasonableness. Why, simply because David Wright could not make his wife happy, should he not be pleased with himself, enjoying himself?

'No shop tonight,' David Wright had declared, and there they all were within ten minutes discussing *Pax*. David Wright was excited about the new office as a bride moving into her first home. What an odd man he is, Olive thought; is he truly inno-

cent or does he cultivate innocence? Yet surely innocence was the one quality which could not be cultivated. Wright was now addressing her. 'Perhaps you'd like to look in? It could do with brightening up. I'd be glad of your opinion.'

'Why don't you ask your wife?'

Mrs. Wright spoke for the first time that night, shrilly, her mouth in a tight, anxious smile: 'Oh, I don't know anything about that kind of thing. I've always meant . . .' She saw they were all watching her and flushed. Her voice trailed off. There was an awkward silence, then the food arrived and Peter Price, the journalist, who had obviously had something on his mind all evening, suddenly announced to David Wright that he had an assignment in America. 'What about a piece on McCarthy for the next issue?'

David Wright mused, appeared to turn over the suggestion. 'Oh, I don't think that's our department, do you?'

'Do you know what it's like there?'

'Certainly. But we agreed from the start to limit our objectives. We have only so much paper, so much money.' The talk went on. Olive noticed that Alan, who had turned up at the last minute but had little to say for himself, was watching with interest. He had already drunk three glasses of wine and hardly touched his food. It was just as well, Olive thought, that Sheila Robbins couldn't come.

Peter Price appealed to Bob. 'You were a communist, weren't you?'

Bob smiled. 'I was a communist.'

'Then you must be concerned about America. If you were in America you wouldn't be sitting here now. You wouldn't be on this committee because this committee would not be allowed to exist.'

Olive bit her lip. They were both right, they were all right. And all she could think was, not one of these righteous, liberal-minded, intelligent people, wrangling as if their pathetic little news-sheet could change the way the world was going by one jot, not one had the faintest conception of what it cost Bob to sit there and say calmly, not I am, but I was a communist. If he were bleeding to death he could not be suffering more yet he gave no sign of it.

'All the same, David's right. There's nothing we can do about conditions in America so we might as well leave them alone.'

Alan said quietly, his eyes shining, 'Then we might as well not publish, if we can't tell the truth.'

But the crunch did not come after all. Alan should have been on at the coffee bar an hour ago. The party broke up early.

'I'd like to walk for a bit.'

Bob and Olive strolled from Soho Square down to Shaftesbury Avenue. The sky lay flat on the city. In the thick air the scents from the foreign restaurants were vivid, but they meant nothing to Olive, who had never left England. Only a bakery stirred her faintly, some forgotten memory from childhood of a fresh loaf. The sky seemed to draw the air out of the city. It was hard to breathe. There was a feeling of something about to break. 'There's a storm coming I wish it would come.'

'You can't have enjoyed that much.'

She took his arm. 'It was interesting.' It was amazing how gossip could bridge a crisis. 'That wretched woman, David's wife. If she hates it so much why did she come?'

'Apparently she had a breakdown last year and she can't be alone.'

'I can't make him out.'

'They were very happy before the war.'

'Do you honestly think it will come to anything?'

'The committee? I doubt it, though it's just possible. I think it's too soon myself. The young don't know how to organise and the rest haven't got over the war yet. They're scared, all they want to do is feather their nests, and you can't blame them. The Party peace campaign hasn't helped. For a lot of people it's made peace a dirty word.'

Olive said with sudden vehemence, 'I could have slapped Alan. First the sulks, then he behaves like an idiot. You realise he was simply waiting for you to support David, so that he could attack you? He doesn't care a damn about the committee, he's just using it to get at you.'

She said nothing in the bus but when they reached their own street, the cul-de-sac with the lime at the corner, shining now as did anything green in this thunderous, unearthly light, she felt she had to tell him what she felt. 'You're right, I didn't enjoy it much, as a matter of fact I was disgusted. They're all using the committee in one way or another. I'd have thought you'd have seen through David Wright. He's your classic intellectual, just the sort of person you and Tim Connor used to despise. His

intellect isn't quite good enough to make him a pundit so he's an impresario instead. All Peter Price is interested in is his own career, but that's honest, at least. The rest are simply pathetic, tingling with liberal sympathies but if it really came to the crunch you wouldn't see them for dust.'

She could have bitten off her tongue, he looked so sad, so tired, so bewildered. Did anything in life have any absolute validity, in fact? Politics, love, private life, weren't they all ruled by egoism? Weren't we all monsters looking out, even in the most fevered moments of self-abnegation, for the opportunity to exploit the given situation, private or public?

'I'm sorry. I just don't know how to help.'

'It will be all right.'

'I wish the weather would break,' she said, and she meant it, touching the rattling laburnum as she passed, a dreary tree.

Increasingly their house became unofficial committee headquarters. For evening meetings the Dean Street office, above a wholesaler's showroom, was inconvenient, since most people lived around the Fulham Road. And Daphne Wright was not up to having her home invaded. Bob reported that from all accounts David Wright had a hard time with his wife, though you'd never know it. He had risked his job by taking two months off work when Daphne had her breakdown. Even now she was scared to leave the house alone so it was David who did most of the shopping – all this on top of his teaching job, Russian classes and work for the committee. 'He seems to thrive on it,' Bob reflected. 'You don't like him much do you?'

With Paul on her lap, having his bottle, Olive pondered. 'I suspect his motives. When someone takes on quite so many honourable causes I wonder why.' She grinned, passed Bob the bottle and laid Paul on her shoulder, rubbing his back. 'You used to say the same about me in my lame dog days. You accused me of evading my own life by living other people's.'

'So I did.'

Olive thought about Daphne Wright, an object for pity: outside her house a wretched woman seized by irrational fears, incapable even of going to the end of the street alone; yet indoors according to Bob, with her home and her family, a normal, happy woman. Perhaps, Olive wondered, this is what could happen to anyone who became too attached to their

bivouac—the outside world would be recognised for what it always was, a terrifying place, the shelter would become the boundary of one's existence. Jews, she had noticed, a race who had been obliged to accept the world sooner than most for what it was, had this extraordinary gift for inventing a home in any available house or room or shed, investing it with a sense of permanence. Yet if the shelter itself were not secure . . . Fatherhood, the son, the crown of his home, had robbed Sam Davies of his magic, made him vulnerable.

Olive had never imagined that she herself was invulnerable but since Elizabeth's birth she had felt sure, more or less, of her own capacity to survive, her toughness. Catherine had proved that toughness can even be invented. Olive was mildly shocked that she felt sympathy for Tim Connor walled up with his grand, epic, revolutionary madness; and saw Daphne Wright as merely pathetic. Daphne Wright was simply less articulate, less attractive, no less deserving. Olive made up her mind to go and see her when she had time. But she was busy. There was her mother who was clearly unhappy in this house. And then Mavis's dying was interminable. She had been sent home, declared officially inoperable and Olive regarded it as her duty to visit the flat above the garage once a week. Most of the time Mavis was so heavily drugged Olive concentrated on cleaning up the flat, making things comfortable for Jack; then, on waking, Mavis called out and whimpered. She wanted her hair brushed, she imagined she was going out, she rambled incoherently about her childhood, a ghastly-sounding taffeta party dress, what a pretty child she had been. 'It's not fair,' she begged, her pale eyes pleading. 'I was the prettiest.' Olive forced herself to take her sister-in-law's hand, not to be repelled by the clammy, greedy clutch of the doomed on the living. Olive had seen many deaths but none as bad as this.

But the committee was better. It was almost like the old times in Dennis's house in the East End—meetings of Dennis's welfare group, cell meetings, the setting-up of the club, people always coming and going, arguing, talking all hours of the night, complaining, enjoying themselves, demanding food, drink, judgement, comfort; in those early days, before disappointment, bitterness, politics and self-interest eroded their passion, there had been euphoria, a glory in the air.

For Olive this new period was almost like old times, but not

quite. For reasons she did not fully understand—though she had tried, after the Soho dinner, to rationalise them for Bob—she was not in sympathy with the committee. She was fond of Sheila Robbins, Peter Price, who was always cheerful, always busy and bursting with plans, disarmed her. She made sandwiches and coffee, put the children to bed early, but her enjoyment of this new turn to her life was tempered. She felt as she had at Polly's party: she had been shut away too much, this was good, she relished it but knew that it held nothing substantial for her. If the committee broke up tomorrow her only sorrow would be for Bob. She passed round cups and plates, was glad to see her house full, to listen to the familiar, sometimes, intelligent, sometimes smug observations of a well-intentioned, cruelly misunderstood minority; for that was how they saw themselves (how *we* used to see ourselves, she admitted): the only sane ones in a mad world, glorying in their plight of being misunderstood. Their sanity they expressed in little jokes against each other, self-deprecating shop talk. Sitting by the window, the warm night air on her face, the tree shining in the garden, she closed her eyes and was possessed by the ghost of her former self.

'I'm sorry, I was half asleep.'

'Bob was saying you knew someone who had pictures? We have to get something that hasn't been published before . . .'

Pictures? 'Oh yes; Polly's gallery of horrors. I've no idea if she's kept them. And wouldn't they be rather out of date?'

'That's the point,' Peter Price explained, earnestly but smiling, speaking slowly so that Olive would understand as though to a child: 'You see we feel the public memory is short. We mean to jolt it.' He looked pleased, as if he had delivered to her, like a dog a stick, a universal truth.

Bob kept a straight face, not meeting Olive's eye. Later, as soon as the door was shut on the last of the visitors and they were alone she grinned, though something about tonight had brought her close to tears. 'And how old do you suppose he was at Hiroshima? All of fourteen?' They carried the coffee cups into the kitchen. 'Oh well, I suppose it's their bomb as well as ours. It would be mean to keep it to ourselves.' She turned on the tap, filled the bowl and picked up a mug. 'But for God's sake what does he think we were doing, what does he imagine he can achieve we haven't tried already!'

'But you wouldn't deny him the right to try?'

'Of course not. The right to try and the right to fail. He's a nice boy, he'll write his novel and it will get a few good reviews and then he'll write another, perhaps, if he hasn't settled down by then with someone like Sheila Robbins in a house just like this. And they'll forget, because one does, and they'll vote Labour because there's nothing else to vote. And they'll have children and join the great blank public memory. Good luck to them.'

Mrs. Armitage came down to fetch her hot water bottle, shining with virtue at having kept out of the way. She had never understood politics herself but assumed politics to have been going on. She was broad-minded, she implied, but the way she held the hot water bottle to her, ostentatiously avoided complaint or reproach, conveyed more vividly than any complaint or reproach how she did not care for her daughter's way of life, how lonely she had been upstairs. And Olive understood how lonely she had been upstairs but could not bear to yield one inch, though her mother would die soon.

Whispered remorse too, in bed, but free to speak and that was something. 'I'm sorry, Oh God, I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. You know I didn't mean you?'

He was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. 'You were right though.'

'I'll go and see Polly tomorrow.'

'I'll have to try. It's all there is.'

'I'd forgotten.' Polly, six months gone, splendid, rich, vast, powerful as a tank, stood behind the linen blinds of her drawing room, one white hand on the closed piano lid, and wondered what she had done with her charnel house, the atrocities she had so faithfully collected in another life. Whose idea had it been in the old days of the group? Tim Connor's? Hardly Dennis Rawston's. Olive's ex-husband did not think in cosmic terms. Polly must simply have admitted that she had contacts and someone—perhaps someone who attended the group once and was never seen again—suggested she should accumulate and document evidence against some hoped-for, never fulfilled time when there might be behind a door, a person waiting behind a desk, to whom it would be appropriate to present this evidence. But they were busy. Keeping the group going from day to day,

just coping, drained them. The time never came. 'But if you want them I expect I can find them.'

'It doesn't really matter. It's some hare-brained idea they've got on Bob's committee. They're very keen.' Olive sank back in the deep, pond-like room, caught her own watery reflection in the mirror and saw she was thinner. The woman in the mirror looked frangible. It was something to be here, cool and quiet, without the children. Mrs. Armitage would be spoiling the children, she loved them, became the single-minded young matron she had never been. No tensions there, skip a generation and there was in all its glory the parental relationship as it is idealised but so rarely ... well, I don't grudge her that, heaven knows. Obviously, Polly had lost the photographs somewhere between houses. 'Honestly, I never promised. They just want something for nothing, that's all.'

But they were not lost. She had underrated Polly's legendary efficiency.

'You don't mean to say you keep files!'

'There you are. Take them all if you like. I've no use for them.' Polly had gone straight to a desk, opened a drawer, pulled out a file and was now spilling pictures all over the piano top. Each was captioned on the back, a typed label with a jumping E, stuck down with gum: how many at Hiroshima, Belsen, Auschwitz, names and dates where names and dates were available, what symptoms, what method, who survived, how long, under what conditions. Take a shower to eternity or go slowly, throwing up. There had never before or since been so many ways out of the world, such curious passages. Oh, Willi and your history of the Jews!

'As a matter of fact, I'll be glad to get rid of them.'

Olive felt sick. 'I'd forgotten how awful they were.' Yet she would not be sick, she knew. The pang, of course; if one were honest, some fascination, but the shudders would pass even before she left the house. More coolly she shuffled the pictures. A few scraps of paper fluttered to the ground. She picked them up. These were not photographs but drawings, in crude smudged charcoal, skilful though; someone like Willi (dead now? in one of Polly's homes? in Israel? Simply a vanished number like Shuklov's daughter?), someone had painstakingly hoarded the inferior charcoal and scratched out a record. A child caught smiling, as if on a summer afternoon. Faces, so

many terrible faces. 'These might be worth something, you know.'

'I don't want them.'

No point in upsetting Polly. Polly was happy. Olive took the file home. The house was empty. Mrs. Armitage was in the park with the children. Olive rang the *Pax* office, but there was no reply. She made herself a mug of coffee, drank it, washed the mug, dried it, put it away. She scrubbed the kitchen floor and the kitchen table, then was so soaked in sweat she had a bath. Once she thought she heard the telephone, climbed out of the bath, wrapped herself in a towel and ran to the telephone but it was only a bird in the tree. She dried herself, put on clean underwear, dressed, looked at her clean empty kitchen and the file in the middle of the table, and thought about the cat. The cat was dead, she had killed it and she was glad it was dead. When she heard the front door click she pounced on Willi, brought him into the kitchen and made tea for them both. She found a cake. She sat opposite Willi with the table between them, the file on the table. For the first time she felt able, impelled, to speak to someone about the cat.

'In the war,' she said, 'I was supposed to be a driver. One day I was driving a staff car back to London. I ran over a rabbit. It wasn't my fault, the sun was in my eyes and the poor thing dashed out of a wood. It wasn't dead, so I had to kill it. I thought it would be tremendously difficult but it wasn't. I whacked it on the back of the head with a spanner. Once it was dead I felt better, in fact I forgot all about it.'

There were cake crumbs on Willi's chin. That was wrong. Willi was beyond crumbs. He said, 'Everyone has had an experience like that at some time or another.'

'If you hurt something, even by accident, there seems this need to break it.' She felt humble before this sardonic man. What was she trying to do, beg his forgiveness? A queer day. 'It's guilt, I suppose.'

Willi nodded. 'That is how it happens.' Willi was not going to absolve her, and why should he, since she could not even say what sin she had committed, why she required absolution? He broke the silence. 'It would be easier for you, I think, if I were to move.'

He was not to leave, absolutely not!

Willi explained, soothing, reasonable, that he could hardly

reproach the British for having kept him out of Israel after the war since he did not wish to go to Israel. He talked and showed her pictures of his family, the survivors. Nothing broken about them. Yet Willi, how could he live like this? Olive shook her head and the tension which had been building in her all day burst out: 'Why do you let us do it? How can you be so resigned!'

Olive's presentiments passed, were drained away in the business of daily life. Elizabeth caught measles, only mildly, but Olive was able to face Mrs. Armitage. Why did loneliness come at the end of life, when one could least support it? 'You see, mother, I can't risk Paul catching it, so we'll need the room. Just for the moment, of course.'

Elizabeth confused the issue by wanting Gamma to stay. Olive felt excluded, tried to make herself cold. Faced by this melodramatic scene, fevered child clinging to grandmother, she thought, it's true, we don't know how to live any more. Mrs. Armitage decided to forgive her son by living with him for a while; Mary Owens and mother, that would be something. When Mrs. Armitage left Olive managed to embrace her and persuaded herself for half an hour at least that she was sorry to see her go.

The next issue of *Pax* attracted more attention. Bob cautiously hopeful, Peter Price frankly triumphant, for his article on McCarthy had been included after all. Alan was organising an exhibition of Polly's pictures in the same bookshop which had put on the Russian show. Olive went to see Daphne Wright and took her shopping. Mavis rallied. Catherine was having another baby. In July Polly went into a premature labour and was delivered of a son, stillborn.

14

WHEN Olive came back from seeing Polly at the hospital there was this woman at the door. 'You must be Olive. I'm Enid Green.'

Sheila Robbins was on holiday from her college and had taken the children out. At first she came round hoping to see Alan, Olive supposed; then she attached herself to Bob and Olive. She made no demands. Elizabeth was fond of her and Olive found her company restful.

Bob came in late from the garage in a hurry to get to a meeting. He ate a sandwich while he changed. 'How was Polly?'

'Quite cheerful. Too cheerful, in a way. I don't think she's understood yet what's happened.'

'Just as well perhaps. I ought to shave?'

'You had a visitor. Though I can't imagine why Enid Green thought you might be at home at four in the afternoon.'

'Enid? What did she want?'

'She wouldn't say. She wouldn't even have tea. She came in though and glared round like a policeman. She seemed to think I was hiding you somewhere.'

'That sounds like Enid.'

'She's quite good-looking, isn't she?'

So it had begun, he thought, polishing his shoes in the scullery. He peered in the mirror, cut himself shaving and wondered if cotton wool would make things better or worse? The Party insisted on the highest standards in all matters, including the most trivial. At all times a comrade will be a credit to the Party. Freedom lies in self-discipline. And so on.

Since he was in all but name only free of the Party what in the world was he doing slicking himself up like this? Because Larry Towers had sent for him, and ingrained in him as deep as breathing or sleeping or putting one foot before the other was the habit of presenting one's best face to the Party.

'Done my boots, Mum?' his father would ask, the small man washing and washing away the day's toil before he went from his job and his home to his real life—the Party. His father must have been one of the few who enjoyed being out of work because then he could lead his real life all day. And wasn't unemployment proof that the capitalist system did not work? Oh Comrades come and you shall be healed, if not exactly fed. He was a small man but he walked fast and Bob had to run to keep up with him. At eleven years old he went to sleep, his head against his father's knee, and woke suddenly, frightened. A famous man, a Welshman, one Evans, had come down from the heights and pinched Bob's cheek. Evans was mythical. He had warts on his hand and his stomach smelled of tobacco. 'You're with us boy or you're against us,' he said, 'there's nothing in between. Come to the Rhondda (oh, the way he said Rhondda!) and I'll show you. Ask your Da.'

Evans was a star but beyond the star it was true, it was all true. Bob walked with Moira by the sweet river and tried to tell her. Moira would not have it, she did not believe in that sort of thing, Moira was nearly enough to make him give it up. But in the raw hungry streets it had made him almost happy. To be a communist had made his life possible.

He was ready now. Olive was in the garden with Elizabeth. Bob watched her as he had that night in the winter street and on the hill that spring and as she turned and smiled he almost decided not to go. The scene in the garden, Olive and Elizabeth looking up at the tree, caught him and held him and made him for the moment powerless to leave, as if there were some deeper meaning in this picture. Lately he had had this experience more than once, the sense of the inexpressible beneath the ordinary surface of life. The more ordinary it seemed—a woman asleep on a bus, a wrong number, the scent of the lime at the corner of the street—the more it was invested with a mysterious significance. Yet the message was never delivered, he was as confused as ever. Increasingly he began to feel that there must be some better, some *simpler* way to live, the bivouac, infinitely desirable. Just to live like a man with his wife and family? If only it were so easy, then there would be nothing to fear.

He went to the back door and called, 'I'm going then.' If he could shake off these broodings, forget himself, concentrate on Olive and make her happy, that would be a real achievement.

Happiness was something he had never promised her. Questioned, she would pause, her hand absently brushing some stuff she was sewing, she would turn in a doorway, the darkness behind her, the children calling, and answer after only the briefest hesitation, 'Of course I'm happy.' He had offered her nothing, now he came to think of it, except some vague, theoretical, impossible aspirations left over from the wreck of his first marriage, of how a man and a woman could live together, in freedom, staking no claims, until the marriage, like the Marxist state, withered away and left simply a man and a woman who chose, in freedom, to spend their lives together. And yet he realised how, as Olive waved and began to walk towards him, her arms full of spiky flowers, that the whole direction of his life had been to put aside the burden of freedom, to lose himself between Moira's deep thighs, in war, in the Party. Believing himself all the time to be free.

'The lilac's out. You look very posh.'

'I won't be late.' He hoped she might ask him to stay, call him back, but she did not.

Bob parked the car round the corner. Larry Towers, travelling by bus, always had some ideological justification for making life uncomfortable and there was no point in giving him an opportunity for sarcasm.

In fact Towers was apparently setting out to be the soul of reason. That is to say, he had chosen to meet Bob not at District Headquarters but at a café off Holborn. The idea, Bob assumed, was to set him at his ease. Disarm your victim before you move in for the kill.

Bob had some difficulty in finding the café and, realising he would be late, almost broke into a run but checked himself. He had no reason to be nervous. He had always despised Towers as the lowest form of Party hack, grinding out slogans in his grating voice, a dull little man apparently without any private life; yet going to meet Towers still filled him with apprehension. Outside the door of the café he felt as foolish and scared as a novice, beginning all over again twenty years ago when he had longed so desperately to be worthy of the Party. Bracing himself to enter, he found he was actually panting, gasping for breath. The street, thank God, was empty, so no one saw what a fool he was making of himself. At this time of night the ugly new blocks stuck up like

tombstones and there was no life in them, they made an airless canyon. Looking up, trying to steady himself, he saw how they seemed to topple against a running sky.

Larry Towers ploughed stolidly through beans on toast, tea and a pastry. Then he went straight to the point. His joviality fell away. 'I'll tell you what is in our minds, Comrade. We have faith in you. We'd like to see your committee a force for peace. You've got a good chance there.'

Now it had begun Bob felt better. Almost, then, as Towers glared at him across the table, he could have thrown straight in that terrier face, I've finished with the Party so you can save your breath. To turn on his heel and walk out into the clean evening, back to Olive, back to sanity! But he was intrigued. How could anyone be at once so blinkered and so devious? How, for so many years, had he put up with this rubbish? He said calmly, 'It's not going too badly. I'm surprised you've even heard of it.'

'It's our job to hear of such things.'

Bob shuffled the cruets. A tired-looking waitress cleared the table and flicked the surface with an evil-smelling rag. 'I'd have thought you had more important jobs to do than spy on me.' Towers had his teeth in the rabbit and he wouldn't let go. I'm damned if I'll lose my temper, Bob thought.

Towers seemed to be measuring him. Where did he come from? Where did he go at night? Bob had worked with him for twenty years and knew nothing about him. He was a man without a shadow. Someone said he'd been in Spain but Towers never spoke of it His measuring done, he announced placidly, 'I'll put my cards on the table. We'd like to see your committee take a line on Korea.'

Bob felt cold. 'So that's all.'

'That's all we ask, Comrade. I must admit I'm surprised I have to ask. You should know without telling where your duty lies Look, let's be reasonable. We're all after the same thing, aren't we? What do we want? Peace. North Koreans, your committee, anyone with half a grain of sense. You're an intelligent man, I shouldn't have to tell you that.'

'I can't do it.'

'You'll agree you've got to take some line on Korea?'

Bob nodded. 'I'm sorry, it's out of the question.'

'I'm worried about you, Comrade.'

'Come off it, Towers. I've worked as hard for the Party as you; harder.' The espresso machine hissed. Bob shrugged. He could never tell this man, he couldn't even explain to himself how the Party had saved him, made him, for so many years, but now, out of his control, his life was heaving into change beyond his control, a swell, a sea-change.

'Don't think that's gone unnoticed.'

'Well that's something.' It was an effort for Bob to raise his head, to look straight at Towers, to speak to him as one reasonable man to another. 'I'll tell you the truth. I honestly don't know where I stand. I'll let you know when I've worked it out.'

Towers was urgent now. 'It's because we value you we think you need a break, a rest.' Now he was a reasonable man. He pushed back his chair. His tone was intimate, grotesquely beguiling. He even put his hand on Bob's arm. 'I'd like you to see the doctor. He'd set you up.'

'I don't need a Party doctor. I don't need a Marxist refresher course to tell me what to think about Korea, or how to infiltrate a perfectly harmless pacifist committee.'

'This may have to go to the Executive.'

'Take it where you like.'

'You're a fool, Wilson. Twenty years in the Party, you've been on the National Industrial Committee, and you'd chuck it all in for some constipated intellectuals. You've gone soft.'

Bob had to clasp his hands together to stop them shaking. 'Maybe I have.' On an impulse he asked. 'Where do you live, Towers? It's queer, isn't it, all these years and I don't even know if you're married.'

'You're ill, comrade.'

'You could be right.'

'You need help.'

'Thanks for the tea.'

Walking back through London, the empty evening city, Bob found his car at last and sat for a long time hunched before the wheel. He should have gone over his conversation with Larry Towers, word for word, but he was immeasurably tired. When he woke it was dark and he drove home. He was frightened as he had never been before in his life, even in the war; and he was exhilarated. Whatever was happening to him, it could not be put off any longer. It had begun!

After the meeting with Larry Towers the anxieties Bob had felt earlier that year returned, but there was a new quality to them. He was now not merely suspicious but convinced that he was being followed. He took to planning his day with the idea of shaking off his pursuers—leaving the garage at different times each night; never going home by the same route. At home he would wake in the middle of the night and prowl round the house checking that the doors were locked. He was afraid, but this time he could not speak of his fears, even to Olive, in fact he went to absurd lengths to conceal them, feeling that as long as they were not named they might be held at bay.

In the past it had been a help simply to set himself a task—a job in the garden, a measured walk of so many miles down to the river and back. He tried the same technique again, deciding to re-read the Orwell books and essays Olive had lent him when they first met. He had enjoyed them then but now because he could not concentrate he found little pleasure in them; though there were certain lines, especially from one poem, which stuck in his head. *Horses, ducks in flight at dawn/All these are a dream.* Could this be true? He remembered the pleasure he had felt on holiday at the shape of the flint in his hand and could hardly believe that only a few weeks ago he had still been capable of such simple happiness. It was terrifying to contemplate how meaningless, how insignificant that flint had become. Willi said that if man ever got into space he would go mad in the cosmic silence, he would be appalled into lunacy by the sight of the small turning earth. Remembering the flint, Bob thought that he was already in space, even the most ordinary death might be better than this vacancy; he should have died when he had the chance, in the war.

Too much feeling? Too little feeling? What was wrong with him? Was nature really taking her revenge for the years he had held himself aloof (that was the only word for it), refusing to give Moira the fight she wanted, toiling through the war like a mole? So he'd lost Alan and now when he most wanted to feel, for Olive, he felt nothing. He got through the day somehow but there was no flavour in anything, there was nothing of which he could say, I might enjoy that. He saw Mrs. Armitage come and go. Her disapproval was as light as a moth. He avoided Willi. He wondered how it was possible to be at once so frantic and so still. He forced himself to read Shuklov's memoirs, was dis-

gusted, but saw his own condition written between the lines.

Yet if he felt nothing why did it all matter so much? For the same reason that Shuklov needed morphine Bob could not finish it in his own mind with the Party. The truth was then, perhaps, that far from being aloof or cold or inhuman, he was too human to be free. And yet, he told himself, until you are free you can never be truly human. 'Free', 'human', he weighed the words and found that although his brain churned them out glibly enough they meant nothing to him. When they had a row and he closed his face against her, Moira would be seized by a passion of washing-up and stand at the sink, mouthing prayer, slamming down each pot, each dirty dish a bead in her rosary. 'When I am in despair,' some distinguished party worker he had previously respected told him, 'I call on the name of Stalin.'

Soon, Bob felt, he would not be able to speak at all. Already reading was nearly impossible, writing, except for the daily business of the garage and the committee, out of the question. Twice after a series of sleepless nights he attended a doctor's surgery, sat for ten or twenty minutes in the waiting room, and left before he was called.

He decided to tell David Wright he would like to leave the committee. He chose a night when there was no meeting and went to see him at his home. David Wright was setting out for the Institute and they walked back the way they had come the winter before. But now the trees were heavy, chestnut and lilac in bloom. Wright looked tired. He had been wearing an apron when he came to the door. 'A splendid evening.'

Bob explained: he had begun to feel he had nothing much to contribute, there were problems with Alan, he didn't want to stand in his way.

All Wright said was, 'You're our only professional, we can't afford to lose you.' Then abruptly he changed the subject and began to talk amiably of his childhood. He had been brought up in the country. He always felt how coarse the seasons were in the city. 'Spring one day, summer the next.' At the door of the Institute he offered Bob his bland face, unreadable.

'I do hope,' he concluded, 'that you'll change your mind.'

Olive looked up from her ironing and asked, 'What's this

Sheila tells me about leaving the committee?'

'I haven't decided.'

'Are you serious?'

'When you've nothing to give any more there doesn't seem much point in staying. So I might as well leave.'

'I think that would be a mistake. For you.'

'The committee doesn't exist for my mental welfare.'

She was hurt. 'If you don't want to talk about it.'

'I can't.'

'There's not much we can talk about now, is there?'

'I'm sorry.' He wished she would stop ironing.

Shirt smoothed, folded, sheet, the smell of ironing, childhood. The clothes horse propped before the fire. He loved her so much, he knew that, as if someone had told him. 'Can't you leave that?'

'Sheila's very unhappy, you know. I'm so fond of her. I can hardly be polite to Alan.'

He was about to say something about leaving them to work it out for themselves, the young living their own lives, but he was suddenly so tired, the domestic scene was too much for him, he yearned to be part of it. Lately being with the children was a strain, the struggle to respond and to hide his agitation almost more than he could manage, but to watch them in the garden or asleep was one of the few pleasures that remained to him. Even that delight was shot with irrational fears: what if Paul caught Elizabeth's measles? why did Elizabeth have nightmares?

Olive laid aside the iron and stood for a moment, sway-backed, easing her spine in an attitude he remembered from pregnancy. She knelt and took his hands. 'It's nothing to do with the committee, is it? If you could tell me.'

'I'm just tired, that's all.'

'Do you want to go away?' she said in a low voice. 'Do you want to leave me?' Then he was crying as he had done more than once in private but never before her. The irony was that at the beginning he had been the one who challenged her to come out into the open, to live freely, and now he knew, whatever else was in doubt, for the first time in his life he needed someone not for companionship, not even for love, but for survival; he could not live without her.

Enid Green arrived unannounced, under full sail, with

Patrick in tow. She sat, implacable, like a grown-up waiting for the children to finish their play, while Olive brought in coffee. If Enid was, as Bob said, a slut, her sluttishness stopped short at her appearance. Her brown-eyed, dark-haired looks were faintly Welsh and she had about her, in a clean, quite ordinary cotton dress, a kind of tough sensuality. She made no pretence of sociability.

Patrick was the other kind of Celt—tall and fair-haired, raw-boned like Tim Connor. He wore leather patches at his elbows, looked ill a tease, but smiled when Olive spoke. He had a cold sore at the corner of his mouth.

For a while the four of them sat around uncomfortably in the small front room. The children were in bed. 'What about yours?' asked Olive, 'is it three or four?' Her remark was addressed to Patrick. His wife answered.

'Four. The eldest's twelve. He keeps an eye on the rest. We believe children should learn to look after themselves.'

'I suppose so.' There was a silence. Olive thought of suggesting they might move out to the garden, but she could not see Enid in the garden. 'It's strange we haven't met before. It was very good of you to lend us the cottage.'

'What is Tim Connor doing now?' Patrick asked Bob.

'He's ill, I'm afraid.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

Bob could not meet Olive's eye. She was anxious for him, he knew. She understood, intuitively, that he was not up to this interview, for an interview it certainly was. As Enid abruptly confirmed. 'If you don't mind, we would like a word with Bob in private.'

'Of course.' Olive glanced at Bob and he nodded. The telephone rang and she left the room.

Patrick unlocked his complicated hungry joints and prowled to the bookcase. Bob looked at the surface of the table and at the view through the arched front window to the street. The scrap of sky above the opposite house was bland and unhelpful. He remembered the view from Jack's window so long ago of a wide sky and the vision of the ship running before the wind. Why hadn't he told David Wright the truth? Then he would have been free of the committee, free to make up his mind about the Party. As it was, nothing had been settled. The committee was split on the subject of Korea and he could not speak, he had no

right to speak. His whole existence on the committee had been undermined.

Enid was watching him, and he felt himself falling under the old spell. A few years ago, before he met Olive, Bob had had an affair with her. Tough, intelligent, handsome, she challenged every man she met and made it more than clear she had picked out Bob. Patrick was out in the garden now, making obedient circles. Enid said, 'Are you really throwing it in?'

'Who told you that?'

'I don't need telling, do I?'

'Did Larry Towers send you?'

'No one sent me. I don't like to see you wasting yourself, that's all.'

Bob was standing over the hearth, looking at the empty grate. 'Enid, are you happy?'

'I don't think about it.' He turned and they looked at each other frankly. Enid bit her lip. 'There was a time when you wouldn't have asked that question. You've changed, Bob.'

'Most of us have, surely? It must be nearly five years since we worked together.' Then he saw that she had not changed at all and wondered how he could ever have found her attractive. Oddly, this realisation increased his feeling of closeness towards her. The subdued husband, the neglected children, could a party which was rapidly becoming irrelevant in England really take the place of husband and children? And yet, when you have given so much to a single cause, how do you live without it?

She shook her head. 'Nothing has changed.'

'You mean, you don't want to admit it has.'

Enid leaned back against the sofa cushions. The flowered cotton pulled tight across her breasts and Bob remembered how from behind she used to remind him of a sturdy mountain pony. That had been, in fact, the first view he had had of Enid Green marching stolidly towards the platform in the Bermondsey hall. On a summer evening, which must have been the time the Greens, teachers in the district, first came to meetings, there had been a golden light and motes of dust hung in the warm air. A fine evening, an evening like this. Enid, conscious of her image as a bourgeois intellectual, had been aggressive, but she had gone down well. No one could doubt her sincerity, she was a good speaker and Bob doubted very much if she had ever been

truly promiscuous. She looked men in the eye so she was misunderstood. Now she was surveying Bob. 'We're not getting anywhere, are we?'

'I'm sorry. Larry knows already how I feel.'

'You've done well for yourself, haven't you? You know, I'd have said once, you were the last person to sell out.'

'That doesn't mean anything to me, Enid, it's a meaningless term.'

Now she looked away, groping in her handbag. Distantly, through his barely controlled tension, Bob was touched that even Enid, like any other woman, needed a handbag. 'Don't you think you'd feel better if you put your heart in the Party again?'

'I don't believe our masters would approve of this conversation.'

'Damn them. Larry did send me, you're right, but I don't like to see you this way. You needn't tell me if you don't want to.'

Bob looked around the room and at the scrap of sky and the garden, as if he were taking leave of so many kindly, familiar objects, though his apprehension was not so precise and his feeling was much vaguer, more clouded, merely one of some indefinable loss. 'I don't mind telling you,' he said and realised now that naming it could make little difference one way or the other. 'I think I'm going out of my mind.'

Olive came in and said she had to go to her brother's. Her mother was ill, could she take the car?

When they had all gone Bob went up to Willi's room but of course Willi was away, he had forgotten. He stood at the window and looked down. A box-cart he had made for Elizabeth was lying on its side and from here the garden and the tree, its blossom hardening into fruit, seemed so tiny, a vision from space of life on earth. Bob listened for Olive coming back or the children crying but there was no call. Then it was dark and because of the vanished box-cart or the diminished garden he found himself thinking, quite unaccountably, of his childhood, not of any spectacular moment but of an evening like this and some small thing he had lost when he was a child.

15

APPARENTLY Mrs. Armitage had tried to commit suicide. About one o'clock Bob heard Olive come in and he switched on the bedside light. She looked exhausted.

'I didn't mean to wake you.'

'You didn't. How is she?'

Olive undressed and sat on the edge of the bed. 'She'll live. It's nothing to worry about. We'd better get some sleep. Honestly, don't worry, I'll tell you in the morning.'

He did sleep at last and some time later he woke and found she was not in bed.

'Olive?'

She was sitting in the kitchen with a glass in her hand. 'The last of Jack's whisky.'

'What happened?'

'I couldn't get much sense out of them. They're like kids, you know, Mary and Chris. I gather she took too many pills and they panicked when they couldn't wake her. I don't believe she had any intention of killing herself, it's all a storm in a teacup. She's all right now, anyway.'

Bob was still hardly awake. 'Where is she? Did you bring her back?'

'I drove her over to Cat's. She won't like it but she'll have to lump it. Sam has a way with old ladies.' Olive smiled weakly. 'I can't blame her in a way, Mary Owens is enough to drive anyone to suicide.'

'Wouldn't you rather have her here?'

Olive's voice was hard. 'No, I wouldn't.'

They were very kind to each other in the morning. Bob said he would try to get home early. 'Alan's still asleep, I suppose?'

'He didn't come in. At least he did, yesterday afternoon, to say he'd get a camp bed at the coffee bar. Is there a meeting tonight?'

'I'm not sure.'

Olive was spooning cereal into Paul's mouth. 'How did you get on with Enid Green?'

'She went quite soon after you left.'

Olive nodded, Paul turned his head away. The telephone rang. It was raining.

Olive wiped Paul's mouth, changed his nappy, hugged him and put him on a mat in his playpen. Elizabeth was trailing around in her pyjamas with a piece of bread in her hand. She dropped the crust into the playpen. Paul tried to roll towards it and whimpered.

'Elizabeth, Paul can't eat bread yet. Please eat the bread yourself or throw it away.'

'Paul wants the bread.'

'Well, Paul can't have it. Why don't you sit down and finish your breakfast while I have my coffee.'

'I don't want the bread.'

'Then throw it away.'

'I want to give the bread to Paul.'

'Give me the bread, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, give me the bread.'

Olive took the bread from Elizabeth. Elizabeth whined, implacable. 'I want to see Gamma.'

'Grannie's not very well. She'll be better soon then you can see her.'

Olive drank her coffee. Elizabeth was inconvinced. No wonder, poor child, Olive thought: father (if she remembers him) gone; cat gone; grandmother gone. 'Perhaps Sheila will come over soon and if it stops raining you can go out.' Alan gone. Even Willi made himself scarce. Dodging the thunder or being tactful? Burgess-and-Maclean, that famous musical hall act, Rowan, Tim Connor for ever, Dulcie somewhere in a bus yelling at her kids or Dulcie, too, broken? All gone.

Olive drank her coffee, dressed Elizabeth by stealth and blackmail, by bribery got her more or less settled, not for long, with paper and crayons. She went upstairs, dressed herself, took two aspirins and found Miss Fraser's telephone number in her handkerchief drawer. In the hall she closed the sitting-room door and the kitchen door and dialled the number. The number rang five times. She put down the receiver. She dialled the number again. It was engaged. The telephone rang, she ignored it, and when it had finished she telephoned Catherine then she

telephoned Chris. Mary Owens answered. The telephone rang. Olive went up to the bathroom, locked the door, took two more aspirins and sat on the bathstool. Earlier this morning—last night? yesterday?—she had left a newspaper in the bathroom. She read the newspaper. The newspaper said the situation is not irrevocable. It was important to remember that the situation was not irrevocable. Mrs. Armitage was not dead but all the same it had been bad last night. The telephone rang.

Olive had not been, of course, clear-minded when she set out, she was worried about Bob, leaving him with the children, coping with the Greens alone. The Tudorbethan semi-detached house on the road to the airport horrified her. Miss Fraser horrified her. She frankly disliked Enid Green and there she was, when her mother might be dead in a pixie room in this gnome house, when she might actually have to face the fact that she had killed her mother, quivering with aesthetic nerves at Mary Owens' front door chime, cosy curtains, Mary Owens' Chris shuffling around in slippers like an old man.

'Hello, Olly.'

'What exactly happened?'

'You'd better ask Mary. She found her.'

Olive's sister-in-law, the large, pale woman, had apparently forgotten their last meeting when she had disapproved, with such eloquent lack of comment, of Olive's pregnancy. Olive used to think her foolish. Around the time of Chris's imprisonment on a smuggling charge, she had begun to wonder if Mary were not stronger than she had imagined. Then, as she walked away from the court, refusing comfort, she had carried a handbag; now it was a tray. Tea, of course, since mortgages on elfin grots have to be paid up; and the funny thing was, when you went without drink you didn't miss it. They both agreed, there were more important things in life than drink. Or living, Olive added privately. Poor Chris and his charmed life. Yet he looked well, even happy in his slippered way.

Mary said, 'She went up for her rest at three o'clock. When Chris got home at six we couldn't wake her. We found the empty bottle. It was a terrible shock for Chris. He still isn't well, you know.'

'It may have been a shock for her too.'

'She's a wicked woman. No one has the right to take his own life.'

'I'd have thought that was about the only thing anyone had the right to take.'

'Well. You'll want to see her.'

'If I may.'

Olive went upstairs. Her mother was awake now, bright-eyed, both ashamed and pleased with herself. 'A fuss about nothing. But I can't stay here, you know, I'm not wanted, that was made *quite* clear.'

Olive looked round the room. She had never visited her brother's house before though she often pictured it; odd, she thought, how necessary it seemed to be (a female characteristic or merely a personal quirk?) to place not only people one loved, but friends and even the most casual acquaintances, in a background. When she heard from Rowan, she saw him sprawled on the floor, the pad on his lap, in an over-heated, under-furnished service apartment; Bob, when she first met him in Dennis's house, had struck her—though she knew he had a son and where he lived—as the most homeless person she had ever encountered. When finally she came to see his home her first impression was not dispelled, she even found herself admiring vaguely the unattached, camping life he shared with Alan. Though she would have been appalled at the suggestion that she might be sentimental about domesticity, there were two scenes of abject homelessness she had never forgotten: just after the war some families she had seen on a quiet road in Kent, squatters on their way to take over an abandoned airfield or army camp, women and children in an open lorry, the men walking; then, later, when Dennis's house was demolished, the terrible hostel which had sheltered temporarily Dulcie Connor and her children. For the first time in that place of women Olive had recognised the smell of hopelessness, and the odour of utter despair would stay in the lining of her mind for the rest of her life, like smoke. Tim (quite unnecessarily, since Dulcie was free to go any time she wished) had broken in at night and rescued his family. And now Tim had in her imagination a place as vivid as if she had visited that walled garden; if Willi was the lighthouse, Tim in his mad garden seemed to her in her dreams to be the heart of this city, the dark, violent centre of this placid world. Tim, sans bombs, sans wife, sans everything, had become

one of his own unreliable explosives, subdued and apparently meek but potentially, possibly even desirably, cataclysmic. We can't go on living like this, she thought.

Her mother was still talking. Olive was curious to see if the house matched her picture. Certainly this room did. It was small and painfully tidy. There were diamond-leaded windows and a vaguely familiar porcelain duck. But if Chris was happy here, that was his business. Mrs. Armitage clearly was not. She delivered a list of the wrongs done to her in this house, she became shrill. 'It's terrible, Olive, to see what that woman has done to him. She has broken his spirit.' Mrs. Armitage really believed this and if she deceived herself, this evasion was natural enough. After the war, when he couldn't find his feet, didn't she give her charmed son the money to start a boatyard? When he got into trouble wasn't his place at home, with her? But he chose to stay with that rabbit and later, when he got out of prison, there was that furtive wedding. He would get married in time, that was natural and to be expected, but under such circumstances, to Mary Owens . . . Mrs. Armitage, lonely and ageing, but by no means stupid and not yet quite defeated, found she got on very well with young people (there were times indeed when she deferred humorously to the certainties of the young); only her children seemed to find in her nothing to love. 'She took advantage of him, when he couldn't defend himself, and he'll pay for the rest of his life.'

'I hope you haven't talked like this to Mary and Chris.'

'Of course not.'

'And the pills?'

'I'm not used to them, that's all. She suggested I should take them, to get some rest. She wanted me out of the way.'

Olive wanted to howl but she laughed. 'Honestly, mother, are you saying that she tried to kill you?'

Mrs. Armitage's bravado collapsed. She was a child again, her face puckered, wheedling, cunning for kindness. 'You can't imagine, Olive, what it's like to be old. No one can.'

Olive said, as gently as she could, 'Chris needs her, you know, he couldn't manage without her.' She remembered the terrible duck, she had given it once, on an impulse, to Mary Owens, who admired it. It was suddenly necessary to rescue her mother from Mary Owens. 'But you can't stay here. Obviously. I've rung Catherine and you can go there until you feel yourself

again. Get dressed now and I'll drive you over.'

Olive went downstairs. Chris was waiting in the hall. 'How did she seem to you?'

'She's perfectly all right. I'm taking her over now to Cat's. Don't worry.'

'I don't feel we did as much as we could. It's been difficult for Mary.'

'There's nothing to fuss about, really. It's not the end of the world.' The situation is not irrevocable. 'I shouldn't be surprised if she outlived us all.'

Mary Owens was hovering at the kitchen door. There was a question between the brother and sister. 'Look after yourself, Olly.'

Mrs. Armitage was coming down. 'And you. We can't live for her, you know. I won't have her back.' As she took her mother out to the car in the golden evening it was hard to believe in this melting light that anything had finished, that Mrs. Armitage had gone too far, that one time had come to an end and another begun.

The rain fell down. Olive dialled the number. Jack answered at once. Olive imagined him sitting in the little office behind the showroom. Every half hour, more or less, her brother-in-law nipped upstairs, as he put it, to see his dying wife. Sulkily, the daughter, Janice, had agreed to take a part-time job and stay at home in the mornings. Jack and Bob had installed an electric buzzer by Mavis's bed so that she could call her husband from the garage. The buzzer rang often, Bob said. Olive made her voice casual.

'Sorry to bother you, Jack, could I speak to Bob?'

'He's not here, Olive.'

Elizabeth came into the hall. 'Paul's crying.'

'Sorry, Jack. I won't be a minute, Elizabeth, I'm talking to Uncle Jack.'

'Paul's hungry.'

'Paul is not hungry, Elizabeth.'

'I'm going to give Paul food.'

'Elizabeth, come here, you are not to give Paul that bread. If you go back and do your crayoning I'll see to Paul, then I'll read you a story, shall I? All right?'

'I don't like my crayons. Those crayons are nasty.' Paul

yelled. The front-door bell rang. If Bob wasn't at the garage, where was he?

'Are you there, Jack?'

'I'll get him to ring you, Olive. It's a bit awkward, Janice had something on this morning and there's a client coming in. Was it important?'

Olive pushed the hair off her face. The front-door bell rang. 'No Jack, nothing important. How's Mavis?'

'Not so bad.'

'Good, I'll be round in a day or two.' Olive wondered whether to ask him, but in Jack's world people did not have nervous breakdowns. In Jack's world you were sane or you were mad, one or two went off to the loony bin but the grey borderland between sanity and madness, the rainy country from whose frontiers Olive, powerless to help, had to watch and listen, did not exist. 'Sorry, Jack, there's someone at the door.'

Sheila had brought paints for Elizabeth. The paints were a success. Paul slept, his fists curled like sea-flowers. Olive made coffee. 'You've saved my life. It's one of those days.'

Sheila smiled. 'I enjoy it. It's funny how children get on with paints if you leave them to it. It's rather sad, in a way, I suppose, the moment someone like me tells them what to do, it's lost. Perhaps it would be lost anyhow?'

'Is that inevitable?'

'I'm beginning to think so.' Sheila stirred her coffee, not looking up. 'I saw Alan last night, you know.'

'I didn't know.'

Sheila stared at her saucer. Whatever had happened last night, Olive thought, it had brought Sheila Robbins no comfort. 'I thought you ought to know; he doesn't want to hurt your husband but he's found out somehow that his father has been seeing old friends.'

Olive was puzzled, then she understood and roared with laughter. 'For heaven's sake, you don't mean because that awful Enid Green has been pestering Bob, Alan thinks he's up to something? What's in his mind? Sinister communist infiltration?'

Sheila looked embarrassed. 'Something like that. And it's not just Enid Green. Peter Price found out, you know Bob's meeting some high-up in the C.P.? I don't remember the name, Towers or something. I know it's all a lot of rubbish . . .'

'As a matter of fact, I had no idea, but it doesn't matter.' Olive's headache was back, twice as savage as before. She wanted the sun to shine, to lie under the apple tree, she was shocked, not because Bob had been seeing Larry Towers but because he had not told her. So much was explained and nothing solved. Sheila had enough troubles of her own, there was no point in adding to them. But she didn't need Miss Fraser to tell her that if Bob truly were in a state of paranoia, if he were enduring, beyond any help she could give him, irrational fears, and reality, so-called, were to assume the shape of his imagined pursuer, then he was in great danger. Life confirms, she thought, watching the rain sweep across the window, life confirms that it is sanity which is fanciful and madness sane. Her own irrevocable sanity separated her from madness, so she could not bring herself to visit Tim, nor could she cross that frontier —however much she wished it—to join Bob and to comfort him. 'So Alan has some fantasy about Bob engaging in a communist conspiracy.'

'More or less, that's what he believes. He hasn't much faith in politics.'

'And you agree with him?'

'Yes.'

'It looks as simple as that to you? Baddies and goodies?'

Sheila flushed. 'Well, no, obviously that wouldn't be realistic.' She was struggling so hard to explain, she spoke slowly. 'I suppose we're just trying to manage without politics, that's all. Does that sound very feeble?'

'Not feeble. I've never made much sense of politics myself. But even I can see that you won't get far sitting on the fence taking pot-shots at Russia and America. Honestly, I don't know. I used to feel the same . . . the world had to cure itself, to become sane, or there was no hope.' Olive shrugged and flicked her ash into the empty hearth. This bloody weather. Where was Bob? 'That's what you're trying to do, I know that of course and I wish you luck.'

'Why did you change your mind?'

Paul was awake, calling for attention. Olive heaved him out of the playpen and smiled at Sheila over his shoulder. 'One gets bogged down. I'm a coward, I suppose. Nowadays I just want to hang on to what I've got. Sorry if I sound bleak. Because we failed, there's no reason why you shouldn't bring it off.' To

hang on to what she had got. But what did she have? The house with the garden and the tree in a certain place; but also Tim Connor, Rowan's frantic messages, Polly's loss, the inevitable failure of the committee, all working like a mole beneath the earth to defeat so many fine hopes. Come off it, she told herself, you're putting on a great show of disenchantment to disguise a squalid case of self-pity. The telephone rang.

'Sorry.'

Polly said she couldn't stay in that ghastly hospital one moment longer, Edward was away and if Olive couldn't fetch her she'd go off her head. She sounded urgent but in good spirits. 'Honestly, you'd think it was the end of the world or something, the way they go on.'

Sheila would love to stay with the children, if the weather cleared she would take them out. 'You're so good with them,' Olive said, dragging a comb through her hair. 'I get the feeling sometimes I haven't got the maternal touch.' Handbag, never mind about face, car keys, just as well Bob hasn't taken the car. Bob. 'This friend I'm going to rescue has just lost hers, and it was all she wanted, the only thing in the world. There must be an irony there somewhere.' Olive pulled on her raincoat. She knew perfectly well that she should let Polly stew and find Bob, tell him what Sheila had told her. She rang the garage. The boy answered. Jack was with a client, Bob wasn't in. 'No thank you,' she said, 'no message.' She rang Catherine. Mrs. Armitage was all right, Olive wasn't to worry. Apparently the newly created Catherine was all right too, not to be broken. 'It's funny, Olive, she doesn't bother me any more. Actually, we're getting on quite well.' If Bob rang, Olive said, would Sheila give him the number of the hospital? 'There's some ham in the fridge and I've done Paul's bottle. You know I'll have to tell Bob, don't you? Won't that get you into trouble with Alan?'

Sheila looked up from Elizabeth's picture. Elizabeth had drawn a house but it was a very strange house; it was black and apparently uninhabited except for a small stick figure in the window looking at the bright green garden.

'Who's that in the window?' Olive asked.

'Me'

'Why don't you go in the garden?'

'Because there's no door.'

Sheila replied. 'I told Alan, he knew I was going to warn you.

We were more or less finished anyway.'

'I'm sorry.

'Sorry,' said Polly. 'I just can't stand this place another moment. They all expect me to go mad or something.'

'You look well enough to me. But are you sure you should be leaving?'

Polly was quite sure, and it was true, she did look well. Olive, expecting drama, was amused to be given orders, happy to obey. Polly absolutely had to stop at the butcher in Sloane Street, then at Harrods, then since they were here, they might as well have tea? Olive did not mention that she had not yet had lunch. She ordered toast. She saw her reflection in the mirror, a shabby female in a cheap raincoat, dark hair plastered by the rain to her face. 'Do you remember the last time we came here?'

'No?' Polly waved to a friend. She was on her third cake. She put sugar, not saccharin in her tea. This was something new.

'I was wearing sandals and my feet were filthy. I thought they'd chuck me out.'

Polly smiled vaguely. Olive remembered, two, three, years ago, longer perhaps, tea here with Polly, who was about to marry, and Catherine, who had just married, three young matrons out on a spree. The animals, she had thought, go in two by two—Chris and Mary Owens soon after, herself and Bob—and she had pondered then, as she did now, upon the mystery of other people's relationships. Polly and Edward had had the omens with them, the perfect wedding in the English garden; yet it was possible that Chris and Mary, with their sordid bleak little ceremony outside the prison gates, were in their own way happier than the Carters, if marriage was to be judged by happiness. But it wasn't of course. Olive looked round and saw that it was a double mirror, so that the image of herself faced the image of herself, which in turn returned its image.

There was something disturbing about Polly's composure. Yet why should she not be composed, Olive asked herself? Women lost their babies, they got over it. 'Would you like to go home? You must be tired.'

On the way Polly was silent. The rain was letting up, it might be a fine evening. Polly said suddenly, 'One has to carry on, doesn't one? I do mind, Olive, it was the only thing I wanted,

but there doesn't seem much point in giving way.'

It was difficult driving on the slippery roads. The lights changed and Olive moved off slowly. Courage or conditioning, she wondered. The bleak inheritance of the stiff upper lip? She herself had rejected her class, her conditioning, and with it, this automatic response. She was confused, idle, cowardly, fighting lethargically for her life, in no way admirable, but at least any courage she had could be called her own. Polly's courage was now a barrier between them, warding off comfort.

There was a woman selling flowers at the corner. On an impulse, as if anything could ever make up for Polly's loss, Olive bought two dozen roses. So going home, her face stiff, her arms full of sodden buds, Polly looked like a bride.

When Olive got back Sheila said Bob had rung from the garage to say he wouldn't be home to eat, he was going straight to a meeting at the *Pax* office. Sheila was giving Elizabeth milk and biscuits and Alan too was sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea. Olive had the impression that neither had spoken for some time. Alan, who had been slumped in his chair, seemed thankful to see Olive. He got to his feet. 'Well, I'd better be off. I only came to collect a few things.' Still he did not go. If he was glad to see Olive, he was also apprehensive.

Olive hung up her raincoat and rubbed her hair with the kitchen towel. She took the tea Sheila offered her. She had still nothing to eat but toast since breakfast but she was no longer hungry. Without looking up she said quietly, 'Will you be at the meeting, Alan?'

'Yes. I ought to be on my way.'

'Would you stay a moment? I'd like a word with you. It's all right, Sheila, you might as well hear what I have to say.' Elizabeth, her face still buried in her beaker, looked up, her eyes bright and sharp. 'Elizabeth, it's stopped raining now, the sun's come out. Take your biscuit into the garden.'

'Don't want to go into the garden.'

Never let your child see that you are desperate. Never bribe your child.

'Elizabeth, if you go into the garden you can have your supper in bed and when you're in bed, I'll read you a story.'

'I want Bo to read me my story.'

'Bob won't be home till late. I'll read you Flopsy Bunnies and

you can have jelly for supper.'

Elizabeth pressed her advantage. Her face crumpled. 'I want Bo.'

'You can have red jelly for supper and two stories.' Never yell at your child. 'Elizabeth, will you go into the garden!'

Elizabeth, the biscuit crumpled in her fist, looked round at the looming adults. Experimentally, she reached for another biscuit. Nothing happened. She reached for another biscuit, opened her mouth to whine, then grinned.

'All right.' She went into the garden.

Olive's headache was worse, dazzling, smashing her vision into jagged fragments of light. She felt sick, Sheila and Alan looked like frightened children. Almost, Olive said, it doesn't matter, forget it, I've imagined the whole thing. Her voice, in her own ears, sounded both prim and theatrical.

'Alan, you know your father's ill. You've realised that?'

'He's a bit tired. That's all, isn't it?'

'He's ill. I don't know and I don't care what your motives are, I don't care why you see fit to leave this house but if you have some childish plot to break him I don't want to see you here again.'

Sheila bit her lip. Alan said, from a great distance, 'I don't mean to hurt him. But there are a lot of people who would like to catch the committee out. We just can't afford a smear. We can't get mixed up with politics, that's all there is to it.'

Olive's anger ran out and now she was just weary. How simply they see it, she thought, the larger the necessity, the greater the simplification. In my day (incredible what a short time ago that was, how long it seemed), when I was assuming postures not so different from Alan's, we weren't so high-minded, we ran with anyone who might help us; because the exigencies of peace were immediate and practical—to find homes for people who had no houses, whose lives had been violently blasted apart. Alan was a child of war as much as any of them, but since then the decencies of peace have taken over, the city is hardly recognisable, wars have shifted to parts of the globe we never knew existed. So the issues now are cosmic, not to be solved today or tomorrow by a cunning application to the right department; and it is possible, in these times, at once dreary and apocalyptic, to enjoy the luxury of not getting mixed up with this or that.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I know exactly how you feel. Though I think you'll find you get smeared, as you put it, anyway. I don't exactly see the Conservative Central Office pouring funds into your committee. Which means you will be left-wing, whether you like it or not. I don't know, I may be wrong. I'm just asking you to leave Bob alone, that's all.' They were so pure, so bloody reasonable, they were not to be appealed to. In any case, what could you offer the young? A rotten past and a hopeless future. Olive realised that although she was only thirty she had never been young, the war had swallowed those years and she had been wrong to discount that blank passage. It had left her frightened, holed up.

She would grow old, she would die, soon it would not be sensible to have children and in all that time she had never, or only fleetingly, belonged to herself. She was so tired. 'You know he tried to resign?' she said. 'That doesn't look much like the behaviour of a conspirator, does it?'

'That's true, Alan.' Olive saw that for the moment Sheila was on her side. This was unfortunate. Up to now, she guessed, Alan had wavered, might even have changed his mind about the absurd little drama he was planning. Now, isolated, he was stubborn. As he shook his head he looked younger, very much as he had appeared to her when she first met him, sitting in the top room in Bob's house with his precious radios, listening for signals from all over the world. She understood how lonely he was. A few years ago Alan himself would have been a communist, a decade or two from now he might be a revolutionary; most likely he would be a perfectly respectable citizen, waiting for his wife to bring him his slippers, wondering why his son hated him so much. It passes, she wanted to cry, it all passes, but then she realised that even this was not entirely true. The surface healed over, the so-called cosmic issues sank to the bottom and nothing seemed to matter quite so much any more. You could say that Bob was simply going through the kind of middle-aged upheaval which any sensitive man endures, that his break with a long held faith was nothing more than a trigger. And yet she sensed without understanding, certainly without being able to explain, that life simply could not be tamed like this, you could not live on the surface, or not for long, there was no safe place.

When Alan had gone and Sheila with him, Olive thought

how sober and sensible they were, in spite of their great aspirations. They were so passionately realistic: war was a bad thing so obviously there must be no more war. It was reasonable, imperative, to steer clear of politics, to avoid the theatrical mistakes of earlier generations, to insist upon the attainable objective. She wondered, if she had told them that once she had actually considered walking to Hiroshima, would they have been interested, or merely embarrassed?

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She had not waited up for him, she said, though she was asleep when he came in and for a moment Bob stood watching her, torn between love for her and envy of her unconsciousness. She had fallen asleep holding the newspaper—it had slipped from her lap to the floor—and the wireless was on, turned down low. She was wearing only her slip and Bob thought how self-absorbed he must have been over the last few months not to notice that since Paul's birth, Olive had changed. Not dramatically, just a slight thickening, a heaviness of the breasts, the texture of her hair a little coarsened. Dressed, she was more striking, richer even than ever before (when he first knew her she was all bones and abrupt hollows, jutting defences); now her flesh was fuller, deeper, it was also more vulnerable. On her thighs and bare shoulders there were bruises—not from love, for they had not made love now for how long? Weeks? Months?—but from humping around a couple of children, from living. He had always thought of her as strong (though not as strong as she appeared or chose to appear) and this evidence of vulnerability was all the more arresting. Tenderness snapped suddenly into desire but he had not the heart or the courage to wake her, though this was the first simple instinct he had had for a long time, and he knew she would have welcomed it.

She woke, as always, painfully. 'Bob? I came down for the paper, I must have dropped off. How was the meeting?' Olive pushed herself up from the chair and turned off the wireless, then she remembered. 'Alan and Sheila were here. I tried to ring you . . . you're soaked. Here, you'd better take your coat off and have a bath. Come to bed. We'll talk tomorrow.'

'I didn't go to the meeting. That is, I was there five minutes. I told David I was chucking it in, I convinced him this time.'

He seemed calm. Olive said as lightly as she could, 'That's a pity.' She sat down again and reached for a cigarette. 'Was it

because of Alan? Because that would be ridiculous, you know. David Wright knows you're a communist, he's a realist, every movement like this has had its fellow-travellers . . .'

'And every movement like this has failed.'

'So far.'

Bob shook his head. 'Alan had nothing to do with it anyway. I don't think even he imagined I was going to stand up at the next public meeting and shout, into battle for a North Korean victory!'

Now Olive was angry again. 'He's a prig and so is Peter Price. America's wrong, Russia's wrong, we're wrong, because apparently we allowed the bomb to be dropped. So he really believes you can start clean all over again, as if you ever can. At least we weren't so pure.'

'I suppose he's looking for a rôle, just as we did. He's improvising. He's more of an idealist than we ever were.'

Olive shivered. There was a rug over the back of the chair and she pulled it round her shoulders. She saw herself as a heavy, bitter woman, there seemed nothing to redeem her impotence. 'I never did much. And you never had the chance to be an idealist, you had no choice. We were the improvisers.'

'It's hard on him. There aren't many causes left.'

'I'm afraid I've no patience with him any more.' Olive was turning off the lights and opening the windows; after the rain the sky had cleared and the air was fresh, cleaned. At this time of night, when the hum of traffic from the main road had ceased, it was possible in this cul-de-sac to believe that one was in the country, especially in late summer when the trees were so heavy and thick the house might have been set in a small clearing in the forest. But then you looked up and the glow in the sky reminded you that you occupied only one cell in a breathing city. 'If it wasn't because of Alan, why was it?'

'False pretences, of one kind or another.'

'The air's so marvellous. Come into the garden for a minute.'

She thought he grinned, though it was impossible to tell in the dark. 'You'll get run in prancing around the garden like that.'

'Then I'll get run in.' Automatically Olive made for the apple tree. The fruit was well formed but small still: Elizabeth had eaten one, upsetting her normally sturdy digestion. Nasty tree, she said, yet although the fruit was bitter and hard she had

swallowed it all before she was caught, down to the core and the seeds. She had been sick but she had not cried.

'What do you mean by false pretences?'

One apple, picked by birds and then invaded by wasps, had fallen to the ground. Bob kicked it. 'Being a communist who is supposed to want the defeat of the stinking imperialists. Then I suppose I believe that things have got so far out of hand, the only hope is a balance of terror, identically equipped murderers too scared to throw the first stone. But the real reason is, action of any kind seems pointless nowadays.'

So what's left? She wanted to cry, and she did not know whether to be happy or unhappy, to feel that he was cured and returned to her, diminished perhaps but more or less content; or to accept that he might be the kind of man who could never live in the present, never accept the ordinary consolations, because he had trained himself for so long to live without comfort. But he did seem better. He was calm, it was possible to believe that he was simply tired. 'Come to bed.'

Bob had finally agreed to go to the doctor, who had given him sleeping pills and advised a rest. After the first night of drugged sleep he had felt unreasonably happy and confident, but by the evening he was frightened again, to go home or to stay away, to be alone or to be with Olive, the one person he could not deceive, yet had to convince himself he was deceiving.

On an impulse he went to see Tim Connor, who was supposed to be mad. Bob realised that his motives were selfish, probably masochistic. An aspect of what he had now begun to think of as his illness, was that it robbed you of pity for anyone but yourself; he had hardly had a day's sickness in his life and now he could remember, only distantly, what it was to be well. For so long he had taken his health and his reason for granted, like a dull old friend, and now it had let him down he was consumed by pity. Once, long ago, he had said to Olive that he believed, in spite of everything, in the basic sanity of the human race. He'd seen himself then—self-indulgently, he now realised—as a sober romantic who had come out, quixotically, against violence (and so, implicitly, against politics in general and communism in particular), but believed still that people were capable of change or could be persuaded peacefully to change. Now, as he felt himself changing, so painfully, so violently,

heaved unreasonably from his rational mooring into a dark sea, he began dimly to understand that there was nothing so remarkable about his state, it was the rule, rather than the exception, reason and experience were no help; there was nowhere safe, no hiding place. The committee, and committees like it, and communism as it had been in the old, bright days, would fail, and simply being human was a self-defeating condition. Rationally, he understood this. Yet he was still full of pity.

Bob knew nothing about this kind of illness, though he vaguely remembered an aunt who had nerves, who felt too much and had to be put away. That night was the only time he heard his mother cry. The aunt had become incontinent, times were hard, so obviously one mad spinster was better off where she could be properly looked after. With the callousness of childhood, Bob recalled, his only reaction to the aunt's disappearance had been relief that at last he had a small room of his own. He had thought of her as old. Only now did he realise that she couldn't have been more than forty. How much had she suffered, he wondered, to what horror had she woken every morning, how long must have been the dark tunnels of her days? Towards the end she grew very thin and, obsessed by her incontinence, had risen half a dozen times in the night to cross the cold yard to the outside lavatory. He saw her once or twice through his bedroom window swimming in her flimsy nightgown through the moonlight; torn between embarrassment and curiosity, he had gone on watching and said nothing to Jack, even when, scared for the harm she might do herself, they locked the door and she complained all night in the kitchen, like a cat, to be let out. Though he did ask years later (or months perhaps: time had a different dimension then) what had been the matter with her. And his mother looked up vaguely from her ironing. 'Oh, your aunt,' she replied. 'She was disappointed, you know.' Bob understood now that she had not been fobbing him off.

Just as he had begun to see queer significances in the normal order of things—omens of disaster in a stopped watch, wild exhilaration at catching a bus he might have missed—so, although he found such difficulty in reading, even in following a sustained conversation, phrases overheard would buzz in his mind for days; a paragraph in a book he was hardly pretending to read, would stand out as if magnified under a glass. There

was no reason behind all this, no message was delivered, a platitude was just as likely to seize him as a profound observation.

He suddenly became interested in the First World War, his father's war. His father, who talked to Bob about most things almost as though he were not a child at all, always refused to discuss it. Why? A million dead, that was nothing by modern standards. Nationalism? Well, that was more nationalistic and imperialist than communism? Some personal horror experienced? Apparently not. Bob's mother said he had been lucky, a light flesh wound early on, then work he had enjoyed on a farm for the duration. And yet somehow he couldn't talk of it, not even as people spoke of the last mess, just glad to be alive. So Bob ordered some books, was at the library almost every day and when they came in never read them.

Then Enid Green sent him out of the blue a new biography of Marx, with the review slip still in. Patrick had probably done it for *Tribune*. Bob almost put it aside, then flicking through saw a note in the margin in Enid's unmistakable, round, schoolgirl writing: 'If you think you're the only one, read this!!' In another mood, another time, Bob would have been touched and amused. Now he read frantically the rather flat account of Marx's last years.

On the way to Tim Connor in the rain, he went to see Enid. Dripping in her narrow hall he must have looked wild but Enid seemed unsurprised. She took over and he followed her meekly. 'I'll get you some coffee,' she said 'Where's the fire then? Take your coat off and sit down. Patrick'll look after you.'

'This book.'

'Oh, you got it then.'

The house was not unlike the Wrights' but here the confusion was not neurotic, simply a matter of rational choice. Four children, both parents working, not much money, a life vowed to the Party, and obviously something had to go by the board.

Patrick looked up and said at once, he was thankful for a break, he was marking extramural papers for University College. It was not very rewarding, he beamed, in any sense. The cold sore had gone now and been replaced by an incipient boil on the back of his neck, which he touched hopefully from time to time. But meanwhile he was totally and quite happily absorbed in finding a place for Bob to sit. The only armchair had a broken leg and there was a brimming potty on the sofa. Patrick lurched

for the potty, caught it by a miracle and pushed it under the sofa. Halfway back to the desk he lost his way. 'We're in rather a mess, you see.' He sounded pleased. Bob wondered how he could ever have patronised Patrick, even in his mind, so cocksure in his pity. He would give anything now to be Patrick, his equilibrium supported by the accumulated pointlessness of his life, which amounted in the end to a kind of vigour. He had learned not to do without things but to smile like a porpoise above them, cresting the waves of disappointment, of his wife's infidelities, the need to earn a living. He had learned not to be tragic.

Wondering what in the world he was doing here, Bob began to talk at random about the only decent thing in the room, a chess set on the corner of the desk, while all the time poor old Marx, sodden, steamed inside his coat, against his heart. 'I didn't know you played?' he asked, as he might have said: I didn't know you were happy?

'Oh yes'; Enid plonked down the coffee tray on the floor. 'That is, Peter, our eldest does. He's not bad.' Enid had a cigarette stuck in her mouth at a jaunty angle. She seemed to have forgotten it was there or that her hands were now free from the tray, but crouched on her haunches pouring coffee from a tin pot, one eye half closed against the smoke. There was no sugar and she did not offer any. A child, about two, came in, with a drooping nappy hanging round its legs. It made straight for Patrick, who humped it on to his knee, and from this place of safety the boy studied Bob with solemn eyes. Patrick seemed oblivious of the wet patch spreading on his knee. There was a faint trail of urine in the air and Enid bashed open a window. 'Bloody weather,' she remarked without acrimony. Patrick looked surprised. Apparently he had not noticed the weather. He began to talk about the leader in the *Statesman*, stammering slightly. 'Don't talk rubbish, Patrick,' said Enid, in her lilting affirmative. There was tenderness in her rebuke and for a few minutes she and Patrick quarrelled happily. Bob closed his eyes, listening not to the matter but the tone of the argument, which was cheerful and oddly sensual, like the mating dance of a primitive tribe. They were talking simple, almost childish politics, and somehow it was all incredibly sexy, but he was too tired, he could not work out how. Olive would enjoy this, he thought, but then remembered that she did not like Enid Green.

He heard that the rain had stopped and in the rubbishy, dripping garden a blackbird was singing. They were all quiet, and Bob felt his mania slip away. He opened his eyes. 'It's a long time since you've been here?' Enid said. Patrick took the baby out and Bob heard them talking to one another very seriously and lovingly, their voices mingled like the bird cries in the garden.

Enid was still at the window, though it was unlikely she had noticed the blackbird. 'So you read it?'

'I'd forgotten. I'm not sure I ever knew it was so bad at the end. It doesn't come out in his writing much.' Bob drew the book out of his inner pocket. Ever since he received it, he had kept it with him, as a charm. Now, as he laid it down in this room it became simply a book: a prosaic biography written by a mediocre novelist shrewd enough to see what the public wanted. It was everyman's guide, workmanlike, well researched, and fair, so far as Bob could see. Splashed across the bright cover was the famous quote: *A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism.* There was a double irony there: the first conceived by the old man, the second as bitter as the whole human race slipping on a banana skin, a case of history indeed repeating itself as farce. Pope and Czar, Metternich and the German police spies, heroes all next to those frightened clowns in Washington. The forces that drove Marx into exile were nothing worse than greedy, realistic by their own standards. America, on the other hand, was in the grip of a national neurosis. Bob said something of this to Enid, could not tell her how much the book had meant to him, why it was sodden from reading at bus stops in the rain. Because it excused his present frenzy? Because this was something every communist went through? These had seemed sufficient reasons for comfort.

Enid turned. She had aged, after all: a little thicker round the waist, the rump touching now rather than provocative. She had one constancy: she would be a communist until she died, of that Bob was certain. She would never explain, never apologise, never regret. 'Then you can stop feeling sorry for yourself, can't you?'

She challenged him; his self-pity was nothing, she implied, in the larger scheme.

He looked at his hands. 'I thought so. I'm not sure now.

What I don't understand is, if communism is based on optimism and Marx died a pessimist, how can we carry on?'

She stood, her arms folded. It had been a row, something like this, Bob remembered, as if from another life, that had finished in them going to bed together, working off their temper in a way that hurt no one. He had misunderstood her signal, she was angry. 'The individual doesn't count. That's all there is to it. If you can't see that, I'm sorry I bothered with you. I tell you it doesn't matter what happens to you. You've missed the whole point. I'm not the bourgeois, you are.'

'Apparently.'

This was the time to go but he stayed slumped, knowing he was cheating, knowing he should be home with Olive, because he loved her and he could not cheat her. 'Well, no one ever died of giving up politics, did they?'

She turned on him, a fury: 'Don't be naïve. It's all that's left, can't you understand that?'

'I wish I could, Enid.' By this, he meant thank you, and he knew as he spoke that neither of them had been speaking the truth, that was elsewhere and by no means so simple. His affection for his father and therefore for his politics, hard times, the clear-cut fight for social justice, war, had simplified some very tangled issues. Now, as Enid put it, he had done well for himself and with his belly full, he could indulge in the deviational luxury of self-disgust (not, Larry lad, the same thing as prescribed self-criticism). It was a joke really: the neurosis of the proletarian fallen on bourgeois times. A matter of growing human, perhaps?

He was at the door then, mumbling civilities. He was ashamed of having discounted Patrick. 'Well, you're obviously happy, Enid?'

'Who's got the time to think about *that*? There are too many of your sort yapping on about happiness.' But suddenly she was a middle-aged woman not entirely without humour, after all. 'Still, we had some good times, didn't we?' Then Patrick joined them, his arm round Enid's shoulder and her astonishingly deferring to him, the picture of a good marriage, but not one he envied Leaving, Bob knew that although Patrick insisted they must all get together sometime, he had finished with that part of his life; he couldn't come back here, that was over. He had broken faith and the feeling he had, walking away through the

rain-washed street, was of loss and rootlessness, terror and freedom; he would have to get used to it, that was all.

Bob stayed with Tim only ten minutes. The atmosphere of the hospital got him down. Apparently Tim had failed to recognise his own wife the day before. He answered now only to the name of Michael Bakunin, the anarchist, and believed that like Bakunin he was held in solitary confinement. He gripped Bob's arm hard enough to bruise him and began to talk wildly about the principles of destruction, the inevitability of revolution, the bloody food, the hypocrisies of Marx, and his love for his children, until they led him away.

PART THREE

17

By September, they were dismantling the Festival, and Polly said they were hushing it up about the King, he was dying, poor love. Sad old stammering King choking to death in his palace, never very real at the best of times. Olive had got over the summer's panic. She stayed in her house, which she had begun to see as a watchtower or one of those desolate country homes in a Russian story where people came in and out and told one another how unhappy they were, how much they wished to be somewhere else. Willi seemed to be the only person who was perfectly happy to stay where he was, perhaps because he had nowhere else to go. She began to appreciate Willi, even to depend on him, partly for his sardonic comfort, partly for his air of being at home in his own frail body. His physical presence affected her, not sexually, but for its eloquent stillness. Having once resented this containment, for his sake, wondering how on earth anyone who had endured such horrors could be so resigned, Olive found herself spending hours beside him at his high window, yearning mildly and without torment to share his vision, as if his acceptance could rub off on her. Elizabeth seemed to feel the same, she was happy in this room and sometimes in the night when she had a bad dream Willi was the only one who could console her. But still Olive would not have thought of using him as a baby-sitter; he was apart from them, absorbed in his vision. He was the eyes of the house, he put things in their place, or so it seemed, while she was in the room.

August had been a bad month. In England, a water-colour country, June and September were the best. On a good September afternoon, from Willi's window about four o'clock or a little later, the air was suddenly thick with gold, a bee, stupid from the first frost, stunning itself against a closed window when it could perfectly well have got out through the door or the skylight. 'I ought to pick the apples, I suppose.'

Willi was darning a sock. He had nearly finished his history so now he could fill the empty holes in his socks with the same mildly sarcastic application.

Olive pressed her face against the cool pane and looked at the golden apples. The bee was dozing, building up its strength for the next hopeless struggle. 'Did I tell you? My sister's becoming a Jew?'

'No one becomes a Jew.'

'It seems to matter a lot to Catherine.' Olive leaned back in the little window seat and smiled. Willi had finished darning the sock but kept it on his hand, like a glove toy, to entertain Elizabeth. Elizabeth was solemnly enchanted, talking to the sock. Willi watched her over the slanting planes of his face. His eyes were deep-set. Olive studied him, still could not quite make him out as an individual, could not bring him as a person into focus but began to see why Bob used to spend so much time with him, why he now avoided him. He was a person with so many mythical layers: the Jew, Tiresias below the wall at Thebes, the victim, the seer, the sounding-board against which it was so tempting to test one's fears and hopes. But then there was the person who had the right, more than most, to be recognised for what he merely was, a middle-aged man who affirmed his existence by the eloquent bareness of his life—and then drily implied that even this simplicity was not to be taken at its face value, it didn't matter and should not be romanticised. Olive asked him what he meant. People became Catholics, communists, every day; why not Jews? 'Her husband is Jewish,' she concluded limply, 'obviously it would be simpler, it would please him, but there's more to it than that, I think. Why shouldn't she?'

Willi's eyes gleamed, as they always did when he suspected he was being trapped into intensity and was determined to avoid it. 'If you say it matters to her then doubtless it will help her to think more kindly of herself.'

'Less guilty, you mean?'

Change was around, it was in the air, people were coming out, dazed, from cover, but were not yet ready to be caught in the open. They were watchful and bored, at once complacent and tense.

'Or perhaps it's just the weather,' Olive wrote to America, to Rowan with whom she had kept up a desultory correspondence

—more enjoyable since he seemed to have become less frantic; his letters now were witty and informative and for her own part, Olive found it mildly easing to express her thoughts to someone she would not see tomorrow or the next day. She was behaving badly in a way, she realised, writing not to Rowan himself but to the idea of a disinterested third party. 'You know how it is in England when the weather's good at this time of year? It's that feeling, but also as if people were only just keeping their balance, as though if they looked down they might fall ... or it may be simply that our lives have been fairly complicated lately.'

Olive did not write, except in a light-hearted way, of personal matters. Confidences were not in her nature; except briefly with Dulcie Connor on those drowsy female afternoons so long ago, Bob was the only person for whom she had put aside her emotional fastidiousness, her primness, whatever you liked to call it, and then not easily. In her letters to Rowan, her silences in Willi's company, she was speaking in a code to which only she held the cipher. Perhaps, even if her nature had been otherwise, open, less austere, she could not have put into words the feeling she had, which overlaid any ordinarily happy, trivial day, of all of them living in a state of extended tension on the edge of change, or of breaking. The young or the naive or possibly the far-seeing put this in cosmic terms: living with the bomb. Olive, picking her way between the wasps which swarmed around the over-burdened apple tree, wondered if there really was a connection, an echo, something in the air you could not escape? Something you should not even try to escape, she would have said once, but now was aware of attitudes shifting in herself, re-arranging themselves like molecules; meanwhile, a state of flux, a kind of seething calm. She raked the fallen apples into a heap, drunken wasps and all.

Lately she had read that book about Hiroshima, now in paperback. Earlier that year there had been the first serious war scare. Facts were still emerging about the atrocities of the war but that was so long ago. Jack had presented Bob and Olive with a television set and, sitting before it with Elizabeth, Olive was aware even more acutely of living in her watchtower, receiving signals to which she responded with a strange mixture of dryness and despair; or did not respond at all. Break or change? If only it were so simple.

Well then, there was private life, so you went on living, as best you could, from day to day. Life could be endured quite easily as a number of small sensations: the colour of the tree, certain ordinary scents, the good weather. The moment of breaking was put off.

Polly survived. The Greens came for coffee. After all, there was no clear-cut conclusion, no point at which any of them could say, that time is finished. Old anxieties were dealt with, only to erupt in new shapes, some days were, without reason, hopeful. Even death never quite finished anything, there were ripples, the living were possessed. Mrs. Armitage, in fact, was already behaving like the dead: in her room at the top of Catherine's rich house she kept virtuously to herself but sent messages—some woollen garment for Paul, a long letter of reproach, a toy for Elizabeth. She was staking her claims. The new Catherine coped, probably because her whole life now was directed to one end, this Jewish business.

The committee too molecularly rearranged itself. Once over the Korean trauma, it split on some other issue, then joined up with another group, more thriving, militantly left-wing.

Polly and Edward had come for dinner, the Greens for coffee, then people were drifting in and out all evening for the election on television. Olive ran out of coffee and milk. Peter Price was bursting with a theory that everyone was in love with the bomb and had written a play on this theme which the Royal Court was seriously thinking of putting on. He had been refused a visa for America, a badge nowadays of distinction. The beer was finished and half a bottle of whisky. Sometime in the night Bob found Olive in the kitchen, making tea. 'They'll have to have it with lemon.' She was dry-eyed but she might have wept. 'It's like the end of a Russian story, isn't it.'

'Lemon tea?' But he knew what she meant. She was wearing trousers and an old shirt; her nails were broken working on the garden wall—suddenly she had wanted a walled garden, it faced south, someone she knew grew peaches. She saw him looking at her hands. They smiled at each other. She had learned not to ask, was this a good day? The pretence of normality he seemed to wish her to sustain divided them. At night she ached silently after him, listening to him move around the house, checking the locks. She no longer believed he might be going mad, instead

there was this sadness, like thin rain, through all their days.

People coming into the house no longer bothered him; he simply did not see them.

Olive pushed her hair back into the rough coil at her neck. 'Those people. That damned television.' On the table this morning's paper: IS HITLER ALIVE? God is dead, Rowan had announced in his manic phase, I shot him this morning. Jews, Jews. Carrying the tray into the room, kicking the door open with her foot, Olive had the feeling that in time the whole world would pass through this house. Edward was adjusting the television, he looked lost, defeated inside his geniality. Polly was moving house once more, she had bought dogs, was caught up again in a whirl of charities. Enid Green had cornered Bob, and Olive herself was captured by a young Jewish lawyer who reminded her of Rowan. He was writing a paper on guilt: if a woman was raped and left in the snow, then rescued and neglected in hospital, then died, who was guilty, the rapist or the hospital?

'Well,' said Olive, then someone came between them. A few moments later she heard him putting the same question to a West African in flowing robes, who nodded his head like those drinking birds you find on pub counters. In fact, the African was, she remembered vaguely, someone distinguished or likely to be distinguished: the son of the man who would be the first president of some emergent African state. After a phase of anti-British violence, independence was in the air, the son was reading law in England, would return to become a government official in dark suit, long white cuffs and watch with thick gold bracelet, gold-filled teeth. Meanwhile, in London, someone had brought him here from the Institute, an ordinary, rather shy young man in jeans and sweater. He must have donned his robes for the election, she supposed. He had been to the house several times and sat quietly, smiling, like the future waiting to come on. Mildly, Olive resented Freddy M'buto; not racially, not because he would have the power, not even because he was young. Why? she asked Bob one night. Not because his father had mutilated a number of imperial dinosaurs. Why? For the same reason Willi will not go to Israel, Bob, said, we're scared, we're in a blue funk, all nerves, bloody liberals. Poised, with the tray still in her hands, Olive was possessed by images in the crowded room: Shuklov, M'buto, Tim Connor, Rowan. A few

years later, when all this was finished, Olive picked up a paper in a railway waiting room and read that M'buto, having been held in custody by the revolutionary government, had fled to rejoin his wife and children. He was shot down, a mile short of the border, in his Volkswagen, as an enemy of the state.

Results were coming through from a borderline constituency. There were groans and a few cheers. The only person genuinely pleased was Polly, but she was worried about the majority. No one seemed to be taking any of it very seriously. Bob was sitting on a cushion in the corner, his back propped against the wall, eyes closed, but he was not asleep; when someone spoke to him, he smiled; from time to time he took off his spectacles and with one hand rubbed his eyes. For a moment, a space no wider than a yawn, he actually did sleep and woke to find Enid Green standing over him again. She wanted to save his soul, he accepted her harangues, but watching her tough little pug face crumple with earnestness, he heard not a word. This one-sided dialogue had gone on for weeks now, like a secret affair, Bob listening spasmodically, Enid alternately cajoling and bullying, all those faces, all that past massed behind her. The Party did not yet accept nervous illness but if he would allow her, she could bring them around. 'I'm not happy to see you like this, Comrade, you see, once you're back with us, you'll forget all this. What do you *want* man?' He shook his head, saw the Party doctor for old time's sake, accepted a tonic and poured it down the sink, no longer believed that he was followed but found himself shamefully caught out by tears, in the prime of his life, without any idea what he was crying for.

Now he heard Olive remark drily, that Enid Green was trying to seduce him.

Olive looked anxiously for Bob but her search was deflected by a hairline crack above the fireplace where the television blazed, a sign that the house might be breaking up from within. M'buto, puzzled, turned to Polly to ask about Churchill and Polly was abruptly embarrassed by his intensity, his need to know. Her conditioning faltered, she looked at her hands: 'Well, no one bothers much about politics nowadays, you know.' She had been born in India, she had certain values, the dead Raj was in her bones and she could not quite shake it off, any more than she could acknowledge yet that she was barren, her child had been born dead. So she asked about Africa but did not wish

to be told.

'Well, he is seventy-six. He can't go on for ever.' Edward took the tray. Suddenly Olive felt fond of him. 'We've got some brandy somewhere. In the bathroom?'

Edward ledged himself precariously on the edge of the bath. He was certainly, slightly drunk. 'Winston, poor old sod.'

'It doesn't seem very real, does it?'

'I rather enjoyed the war.' He sipped the brandy from a tooth-mug. Olive leaned against the wall, smoking. This was the only room they had not re-painted. Up in the corner, above the cistern, a spider had woven an intricate and beautiful web. Where the casement never quite met a tendril from an old ambitious rose, before their time, now gone wild, thrust its way into the house and flourished. In the bath there was a battered duck, a boat, a cake of soap and a nappy.

Inside Edward's jacket Olive saw a snappy pair of red braces. 'I think a lot of people did, if they'd admit it.' Olive reached for his glass to refill it and saw, as if this were not her body and she had no interest in it, that Edward caught her hand and held it against his cheek. He used not to drink, but then there were a lot of things we used not to do. It was queer, the feeling of his moustache on her hand, softer than she had expected. Gently, she tried to extricate herself, but he hung on, mumbling into her palm, she was so strong, his face pressed against her belly, what was the point, how did you go on? He lurched away from her and was spoutingly sick. 'I'm no different, you know,' she said, passing him the towel. 'You mustn't imagine anything'; thinking all the time what a farcical scene this was, how primed to be misunderstood. Edward pulled off his jacket and thrust his head under the cold tap. She might be a little drunk herself. HITLER LIVES! 'Sorry,' she said. 'I'm sorry, so sorry.' So she was, for herself, but only among others and principally at this moment for Edward and Polly. From her watchtower, which Edward mistook for strength, she thought, grief is supposed to bring people together, isn't it? This was a fact of life she had imagined for years to be true until now she was presented with the evidence of the dead child living so reproachfully between Polly and Edward; pictures on television of a Korean woman cradling a dead infant in her arms, the flies already settling around its eyes. But that proved nothing, did it? In a year or two that kind of picture would become as meaningless as the weather. Edward

towelled his face, his eyes were laced with little red veins, he was getting a paunch. Embarrassed, Olive felt she had to put the question she had evaded with Polly: 'Is there really no chance? She can't have another?'

'Apparently not.'

'It isn't everything. She seems to have got over it very well.' Insincere jolly nurse voice, out of practice.

Edward was slumped now on the bathstool, braces sagging. 'She won't recognise it. D'you know, she's still got everything, the clothes, all that stuff. What do I do? Chuck them out? Shock her out of it?'

'I don't know. I'm not sure you can force anyone to change.'

'I'm scared for her. People can only take so much.'

'It's all right between you, is it . . . otherwise?'

Edward was quite sober now. He sat with his hands swinging between his thighs then suddenly he was up again at the clouded mirror making himself dapper. 'We don't, as they say, live together as man and wife. But then that sort of thing never mattered much to us.'

'Sex, do you mean?'

'I mean I knew why she married me.'

'And you could accept that?'

'For myself. I don't know about her. I don't know what will become of her.' He was repaired now, almost as good as new. 'Sorry about that, I don't usually go on.' Someone tried the door and went away. Edward bowed from the waist and offered his arm. 'Shall we go down?' A loving man. 'I'm fifty-five, you know. It's quite pleasant to think one will be finished with all that soon.'

'All passion spent? I don't believe that and I don't think you do, either. Old age is something either better or worse but I've never heard of an easy death.'

'So I'll be a dirty old man before I'm through.'

'Well that might be something to look forward to. But it's odd, isn't it?' she said as they went down. 'For such a long time nothing seemed to happen and now we're all changing. Do you get that feeling? We have to change?'

Downstairs the mood had changed, something had changed. Alan had arrived with Sheila in tow. Everyone was watching the television, this was the crunch, the Tories were in by the

skin of their teeth. After a while someone said, 'Well, that's it.' The tone was rueful, there were a few feeble jokes, dutiful laughter, then Enid Green's emphatic: 'So we're to be set free then, are we?' Polly's voice from somewhere: 'Well, you must admit he's marvellous for his age . . .' More laughter, Polly, in the enemy camp, bewildered, then laughing herself. There was talk about going on somewhere, there was a club in the Fulham Road that stayed open all night . . . Olive offered sandwiches. There was talk about cars, baby-sitters, hardly anyone here was under thirty. No one seemed to want to stay or to leave, no one ate the sandwiches, the air was thick with smoke. Alan could not understand what they wanted, why they hung on, why he had taken it into his head to ring Sheila tonight and to come here. He had left the committee. He had given up the Russian classes and was saving to go abroad. If Sheila wanted to come with him, that was fine, but in his vision conceived on the camp bed, too narrow for love, he was always alone, leaving.

So they were left alone, together, just a few of them who had no particular reason to go home. Bob slept against the wall or seemed to sleep, dreamed briefly of his father who had deserved more love, better luck; deserved at least to be remembered, yet it was always the old man who believed in nothing, loved no one, who shoved his own dark, oblitering thumb print across kinder memories. In Essex he took Bob out fishing (where was Jack?). The scaly sea heaved and rather than throw up the boy swallowed his sick. The old man hated sea, fish, brewers, politics, religion, took in the end against his own family; so what was it about him? The will? God save us from our fathers who begat us. He was empty now, a vacancy, so many shadows free to move in. He opened his eyes and saw Olive watching him anxiously, signalled that he was all right. The television, sound turned down, flickered, Bob would have liked to sleep.

There were jabs of general conversation but the ghost of politics was in the air, no one could quite be bothered, nor could they shrug and turn away. Enid Green was swatting Peter Price, a very keen young dog, flushed from Engels and his vision of the last great war dance. 'Freud's death wish, you see! It's obvious.' His face was bright pink and his hair already receding, although he was only twenty-three. He had a theory of history, the parallel between political and private life, nations

and individuals, a cosmic psyche, a cosmic breakdown? Enid grinned, very Welsh: 'I don't know about that, boy. Looks more like a wet Monday to me.'

Someone laughed. There was an edge of hysteria. Stammering, smiling, Patrick Green intervened: weren't there several points here, hadn't they perhaps become confused? He suggested gently, weren't they dramatising a very simple issue? Socialism had not come to pass in England, not as they had hoped. It was hard to know who should be blamed for that but what mattered was that England was now a nation without politics. 'We've lost it, that urge to life.'

'Really . . .' Polly could not let this pass. 'You talk as if socialism were the only cause with any life in it.'

Sheila Robbins spoke up with surprising firmness. 'Well it is, isn't it? If you believe in socialism you believe in change, and change is life, surely?'

Something in her tone calmed them. Peter Price, who had been looking bewildered, bounced up and passed the sandwiches around. Alan was sorting through gramophone records, stood with Brubeck in one hand, Mozart in the other, balancing them. Peter Price settled on the floor by the sofa where Enid Green was yawning frankly, her mouth wide open. She pulled up her bra strap, looked around with bright eyes. She seemed tireless. Olive wondered what time it was.

Elizabeth wandered in, rubbing her eyes. She did not go at once to Olive but stood looking gravely round. There were red smudges of sleeplessness below her eyes, her hair was damply whorled with sweat and as she wavered there, taking them in, her solemn gaze flicking over familiar faces and coming to rest on Freddy M'buto, Olive was almost unbearably seized by the sense of her daughter's otherness: Elizabeth's existence as something if not entirely independent of her, then forming already beyond her protection, seeing more, perhaps, than she had done herself. Seeing too much? Freddy held out a hand, with a gold signet ring on the little finger, and Elizabeth touched it, wondering if the black would come off. She was not surprised by the robes.

Then she was a child again and went to Olive, lolling, as she used to, against her breasts, fighting sleep. 'Come on, love, what's all this?'

A late comer had brought a bottle of Algerian wine, which

was poured out and produced a few stabs at jollity; Daphne Wright, let out on her own for once, plucking at her dirndl skirt and talking too much; Enid telling a story, out of the blue, about her childhood in Wales; Alan putting on a record, then a second wind, a feeling of closeness and warmth. Turning with the record sleeve in his hand, Alan met Olive's absent gaze—and yet not altogether absent, possessed as she was by the memory of the last time they had met, the drama, which embarrassed her; and then he smiled suddenly, that smile of great sweetness so like Bob's. So we're friends again? they were saying to one another, or at least it was possible they might be friends. Vaguely, bewildered by this strange night and yet prepared, even mildly determined to witness it, Olive pressed her lips to Elizabeth's damp hair. Only with the children did public demonstrations of affection come easily to her. You're a cold bitch, some man had spat at her, wrestling in the dark at a party years ago, in the war. She heard later that he was dead.

When her children were going to be ill they gave off, in sleep, a strange acid smell. She desired (needed, loved?) Bob, she was randy for him and caught out now, as she had been so abruptly by her love for her children, by the need to feel him inside her, an ache which was literally physical, low down like a burden she trailed after her; so her bitch sibling tormented spasmodically the witness in the watchtower. The language of the bitch was coarse and specific and had to be answered. Yet he looked so grey, so stranded by the wall—her ripeness was something she must keep to herself. What a time, Olive thought, to discover you are a passionate woman. What rubbish.

Alan was sitting on the floor, Sheila's head resting against his shoulder. Why not? he thought, he would be leaving soon anyway, but he knew that he was hiding from himself another response, a discovery about himself he could not yet quite frame into words. Since he'd left his home, left the committee, broken with Sheila, he'd lived like a monk, trying to make himself hard and single, make a virtue of his solitariness. And that for a time had been enough, a pride in his narrow bed, burning eyes as he washed up at dawn in the coffee bar, moving quietly, self-contained, through a world he found altogether alien. Freedom, an end in itself, so it had seemed, a life as little as possible like his father's. But then, in that case, all he was doing was reacting against his history, so he was no more free than anyone else, was

he? He'd argued all one night about this with Peter Price, who'd admitted, in the end, he was in love with Sheila, then rubbing his hands through his sandy hair: 'It's you she wants, the original barefoot bastard, rot your socks.'

By two or three o'clock the young people had gone—Peter Price and Sheila in his little car, with Alan perched in the dicky. Others came and went, weariness took over where the drink had run out and tongues were loosened, it was a marvellous wake, the half dozen left of the same generation and experience, speaking quietly between long silences. Exit Uncle Vanya, Olive thought, gunshot offstage, and her mind ran up to Willi speechless in his tower, out, beyond the bounds of her house to the walls and the peaches; Elizabeth, thick with sleep, was heavy on her lap. Were these times really like those plays, she mused? Such passionate trivia, such doomed longing, the good intentions mislaid. The interminable sadness of human life.

Those who remained could relax now; they spread themselves, the room, which had seemed too small, contained them easily, there were even pools of vacancy; the tiredness, the experience they had in common, both the past and the troubles and compensations of being around forty, were companionable, relaxing. When the young people left they actually or mentally heaved a sigh of relief. Enid had kicked off her shoes long ago. Bob stretched his cramped limbs. They spoke a common language so it was, in a way, unnecessary to speak. They all had, just for a moment, the feeling of being cast up upon the same beach.

Then, out of the air, a wraith was conjured though not yet named, the spectre which had been present all night. Edward was thinking of going to Moscow, officially on a cultural jamboree, privately in the hope of establishing contacts. Sooner or later Burgess or Maclean must surface there; if in five or ten years they were allowed to publish in the West he wanted Williamsons to have the first bite. It was a long shot, the firm's connection with Shuklov would be no help, but the Russians would be the first to see the propaganda value. There was some gossip about the mythical third man, rumours re-hashed; everyone was bored with the subject yet returned to it compulsively. The more colourful the theory, the more acceptable it appeared, until it seemed as if they actually needed to believe, as though

the existence of this hypothetical traitor comforted them. Edward, of course, had inside information: he named someone who was apparently high up in Intelligence.

Polly protested: 'But we had him for dinner!' then she laughed at herself.

'All the same, if he exists, he is a traitor, isn't he?'

Bob murmured: 'A patriot too perhaps? True to himself?'

'Sentimental twaddle.'

'Patriotism?'

'Well, we're tired, aren't we?' Olive suggested, and she was not clear if she meant the time of the night or the exhaustion of a generation, or if one was the mirror of the other. 'I mean, it's what Patrick said, we've spent everything we had and now obviously we're worn out. Which means we're harmless at least, and that must be something.'

She hoped to be contradicted and it was Patrick Green who returned to the theme of the irretrievable loss which haunted them, vague, mysterious, political, personal, perhaps nothing new after all but something they struggled between silences to define in this dim room. The small looms of the two table lamps did not reach to the corners where Olive remembered all the signs of daily life had been thrust when the visitors arrived: toys, a jumble of darning, the clothes horse. Now the television was off the fulcrum of the room on which they seemed to turn and to which, unable to discern each other's faces, they addressed themselves, was a bowl of fruit on the low table. From time to time someone shifted and the hallucination of statues around a fire was broken by the sudden flash of Polly's rings as she brushed some imaginary ash from her lap, Patrick's restless bony hands, Edward crossing his legs. Only Bob, still with his back to the wall, his head tipped either to ease his neck or to follow the conversation, gave the impression of absolute stillness, except for a small frown because looking up he could not escape the glare from beneath the shade, and was dazzled. Patrick laid down with a kind of tentative firmness: 'But we can't blame it on the war, not entirely. Don't you think, we tend to see the war in childish terms, as a common experience, like a bad childhood, something over which we had no control? Well, we didn't, of course, but then it wasn't the same for everyone, was it?'

'But it was,' said Polly, staring at her lap, 'It was the end of

everything. Nothing's been the same since, filthy, foul. And we didn't learn anything from it, not one darn thing; that's true, at least.'

'Well, we survived,' Olive said, more or less to herself. 'Does anyone learn? I'm not sure experience isn't just a burden.' The past had no message, and yet it hung over them, there in that room, a powerful presence but one they could put to no purpose. Ghosts, she pondered, and understood for the first time the meaning of haunting or of being haunted: everyone's face had the same wrapt look she guessed she wore herself, of being possessed, in a way that was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, of recognising the wraiths which had gathered dumbly shoulder to shoulder just outside the circle of light. Her father, his face averted because she could not remember it, but the narrow shoulders, the military carriage, unmistakable; the dying she had seen in hospital at the end of the war; the long file of homeless on the road in Kent, less afflicted yet mysteriously more terrible than all the victims one was called to witness now day after day, corpse piled upon innocent corpse, a tide of suffering so thick and remorseless that all one could do was breast the flood, keep one's head above water. Willi, of course, he was there but a little apart, fading now, full of messages he would never deliver. Rowan, Alan as she had first seen him alone in his room with the crackling radios. And Bob, more present really as a ghost than he was in the flesh, so far had he outstripped them in one way, in another sense gone so far beyond the ordinary human comforts Olive ached to offer him, he had in the silent ghostly dialogue of their marriage already left her. A fact, Olive realised with a shiver of foreboding as if a whole bleak future had been presented to her, she was not yet prepared to acknowledge. Early morning horrors, she decided, and as though some telepathic signal had run between them all, both the Carters and the Greens roused themselves and said it was time they were going. Enid had not spoken of communism after all, but she mentioned that other ghost: 'Whoever he is, makes us look kind of daft, doesn't he?' Her tone was wistful against her nature, or an expression perhaps of her true nature. What she meant by us she did not explain. She yawned. 'Well I hope he gets away with it. I wish him luck.' For some reason she patted her husband's hand and said, looking straight into Patrick's face and then round at them all with an open, appeal-

ing simplicity: 'It's not politics but you've got to admit, it's better than being dead.'

Olive took Elizabeth up to bed. When she came down Bob had opened the windows and emptied the ashtrays. He was in the dark. 'What time is it?'

'About three.'

'I thought they'd never go. You go up,' she said, 'I'll finish clearing.'

'Leave it till the morning.'

'I suppose Polly and Edward will break up.'

He shook his head and they stood side by side looking out into the garden, not touching. 'It was all rather emotional, wasn't it, in a peculiar way. Those Russians,' she wondered, 'they wanted so much to change, but they couldn't, could they? That was the point, I suppose. It's appropriate, isn't it, Edward going to Moscow. Though now it would be Israel, if one were a Jew. We'll just have to accept that we're provincials. That's how we must seem to Freddy and his new Africa. I wonder what will become of them.' Will you leave me?

When Olive was alone the last ghost came and stood quietly beside her, Tim Connor; the madman, the famous anarchist. Then he too was gone and she watched him recede, dissolve. It was morning, time to go to bed, a long night.

18

ONLY in the silent dialogue of their marriage did Olive ask, will you leave me? At bad times, in her mind, hurled recriminations at him and then with an equal passion consoled him, drew him back to her. Mostly, in fact, they were all kindness and gentleness, not merely for one another but for their marriage, which seemed to have become a third person, an invalid in the house, having flesh of its own. In her first marriage there had not been this third presence, this connection, and so in a sense, nothing to be lost by its breaking. She would have thought need might have brought them closer together. There was a time, earlier on, when this might have been so; another kind of woman, less austere, or scrupulous, or however you liked to put it, would have made scenes, charged after him, dragged him back from the shadows; look, the bitch yelled, there's nothing there, everything you have is in this house. But Olive bit off her tongue and whatever it was that was happening to Bob stood between them.

There were incidents that autumn, unrelated. Mrs. Armitage announced abruptly but calmly that she was going into a home. She had made all the arrangements herself, somewhere in Barnes, quite cheerful, a young staff. She had always got on well with young people. 'Really,' she explained to Olive, 'those stairs at Catherine's were too much for me. Besides that was only a temporary arrangement.' She was so bright, her vigour renewed, and Olive, who should have been thankful, felt as if she had murdered her mother. She could not even pretend to herself that this was another trick, like the fake suicide. That affair, she had told herself, had settled things between them for good, but now this surge of feeling caught her out, a mixture of the most intense pity and guilt. Standing by the window in the sloping room at the top of Catherine's house, looking down on the treetops, now almost leafless, Olive imagined she might be suffering a delayed reaction; that evening at Chris's, when her mother had, it seemed at that time, tried to kill herself, she had

felt nothing, made herself feel nothing because it was necessary to cope. Now nothing was required of her the distress of that time caught up with her. It had been the same, she remembered, with the war: only when it was over did people start to go out of their minds or to have dreams or to develop hypochondriac illnesses. She herself had got off lightly, yet there were still streets in London she preferred to avoid. Not only in bad dreams but sometimes on a bright, ordinary afternoon, she was aware of the ruined city smouldering beneath the comfortable present. The rawness now had been healed and covered but the stench of burning lingered on, caught in pockets of time. They had all been a little mad at the end, crazed animals running from a fire. Now, apparently, they were free, and watching a child on the opposite pavement, whirling a sparkler, the stars falling and expiring on the damp pavement, she realised it must be Guy Fawkes night.

Mrs. Armitage was sitting on the bed, her bag packed, like a child waiting to go to school. She is not a child, Olive told herself, she is a grown woman; I have broken with her, that is finished. Yet she knew perfectly well, nothing is ever finished, you can never say, that was where it ended and another time began. She had not expected absolute happiness, but she had imagined she might fashion, with Bob, a private life of ordinary peace. She understood now how fanciful that vision had been, of the house and the tree. Life was a messy business, untidy, ragged; and the same forces which made it ragged and untidy also enriched it and provided some kind of continuum, if only the certainty that a truly private life is given only to lunatics, and stillness is always precarious? So she told her mother, with stiff face, you can't go to that frightful place, you'd better come back with me.

'Oh, it's quite settled.'

'Well,' Olive concluded, 'at least you won't be far away.'

Downstairs, waiting to drive Mrs. Armitage to Barnes, Olive tried to comprehend Catherine's new life. Part of this new life was, it seemed, that her step-sister was never alone. She worked for some Jewish charity which had 'adopted' a hospital in Tel Aviv; then there were her friends, mostly the young wives she met on the charity committee; Sam, whose office hours seemed elastic and could be found most afternoons around tea-time playing with his son; and Danny, of course, the child, a solid,

rather lethargic infant whom Olive considered privately to be overfed. Since Sam's firm had won a contract for a new hotel the *au pair* had been replaced by a real nanny, who did not join the family for tea. After her conversion Catherine took, as a compliment to her mother-in-law, the second name of Sara.

Danny's eyes, like Sam's, were so dark they might have been fringed with kohl. As Sam lay on the sofa, the child clinging like a puppy to his chest, Olive was both touched and embarrassed, as an intruder might have been, by the father's passion for his son. There was something spiced, sensual, about the scene. Though she had once mistrusted him when he seemed to have too much power over Catherine, Olive was now afraid for Sam Davies, and in that moment she felt again that shiver of foreboding and recognised that her fear was for herself. She was growing fanciful. Sam Davies was happy.

Catherine, now heavily pregnant, sway-backed, dropped a piece of cake in her husband's mouth, absently smiled as if she had remembered something. Olive was aware, abruptly, of an intense physical connection between the man and the woman and the child, a sensation so strong and electric they made a magic circle. Olive did not believe that anyone could basically change; somewhere in this new Catherine who wore her mother's presence or her absence lightly, was the younger, vulnerable one, the child who had been damaged and gone mad, resting quietly, it was to be hoped, in this sane and beautiful woman.

Olive herself felt stiff with common sense, awkward. As she marched her mother out to the car she felt the need to say from her paper lips something loving; but then there was a thud from some distance away, an acrid smell and then two more reports, closer, the first explosions of the night. Olive turned on the car radio: in Islington a child had been blinded by a home-made firework. As they approached Barnes some idiot had lit a fire in the middle of the road. Olive had a mad impulse to drive straight through it, but at the last moment she swerved.

He was better, in the sense that he could carry his body as one might support a cripple, feed it, function as a man is expected to function, but where once he had known his place, his direction, now he was lost, quite lost. All his life had been vowed to some vague idea of freedom and now he had slipped his moor-

ing and was free and all he felt was impotence and weariness. Enid was ready and willing to tell him where his life lay, might even have taken him into her bed, a corpse. Those times, those good arguments, were over.

Enid would not leave him alone. There were steamy cafés and early pubs. The fires in the streets puzzled him. Larry Towers and his henchmen were waiting.

'You were on the Industrial Committee in 1948. You did some fine work in the docks then, Comrade, don't think it wasn't noticed.' This was Gerry Clegg, a high-up in the Executive; he had not been introduced but Bob knew him by sight and was bitterly flattered that he was considered valuable enough for Mahomet to come down from the mountain. All the more that he had not been summoned to the Party offices (perhaps Enid had persuaded them that nothing would drag him there). Whatever their motive, they had chosen to meet him in a pub round the corner from the café where earlier that year he had had the confrontation with Larry Towers. Every time the door opened and someone came in he trailed a breath of smog after him and it was like a ghost entering.

'I feel like Trotsky,' Bob had muttered to Enid as he held open the swing door for her to go through. In spite of the weather Enid looked handsome tonight; crystals of damp shone on the cheap bit of fur at her throat and all the way in the bus (Olive had the car to take her mother to Barnes) Bob had been uncomfortably aware of her solid physical presence; in his present state her very matter-of-factness, her lack of imagination, assumed absurdly sensual dimensions, as though, if he could curl up against that common sense, he would be saved. Olive's understanding estranged him. Her fear for him was his fear for himself. He could not have entered this room with Olive.

'They want to help you, that's all,' Enid whispered. 'I've been to some trouble for you, you know.'

'Why should you bother?'

'Because I'm daft, man. I'm a bit soft for you, if you want to know.'

The men were planted like statues round the table and there was at that first sight something grand about them. Then there was the business of getting drinks. With his useless new perception Bob observed Gerry Clegg, the black hairs sprouting from his nose, the middle finger of his right hand cut off at the joint;

the silence, the weighing, heavy, not like Larry's foxy measuring. Larry was as subtle as a butcher at a beastmarket, sizing you up to see if you'd do; Clegg, puffing on his charred pipe, was quietly, formidably genial, as if all this were quite normal to him, he spent every evening in seedy pubs bringing deviators home to the fold. While Larry and a rough, thick-necked boy Bob had not seen before went to the bar Clegg spoke for the first time, making his remark about the Industrial Committee. Exactly the remark, if his intentions were benevolent, he might have been expected to make; Bob felt that Clegg was playing the simple man. He mumbled: 'If you mean the ban arms for Malaya business, that was a damp squib. The N.I.P.C. overrated loyalty there.' Clegg wagged his head judiciously. 'You could be right.'

Larry and the boy came back with beer, pineapple juice for Larry and gin for Enid. Gerry Clegg acknowledged his drink with a nod. There was an embarrassed silence, then general talk about the weather, the election. Someone mentioned Ronnie Parker, an ex-party worker who had spread his recantation all over the Sunday papers. Bob had known Parker in Rotherhithe and worked with him for many years; he had always thought of him as narrow, just another Party hack, and now, when he wanted to speak for him, he was dumb. All he felt was disgust and impotence and the fog in his bones rising to his mind: he was appalled by his presence here, by his weakness, by the damage he had done to his love with Olive, the tears he had never spilled at his father's grave, by his reasonable life, his lost son and Moira's body which had been so rich, rotting in the casket; and most of all by his silence in the company of these ordinary human men who had failed, simply because they were human, to sustain a vision.

'He went soft,' Larry Towers said of Ronnie Parker.

'You talk as if he's dead.' Bob felt like a child cheeking his teacher. It was all back, the worst of it, the fears, the imaginings, but worse in a way because he knew now he would not go out of his mind but was stuck in it for ever. He'd been tramping round the same pit for months and realised now, as he covered his hand to hide the shaking, that there was no pit except in his own mind, and there was no way out of it. For the first time he contemplated suicide.

'He might be better dead.' Larry was obviously uncomfort-

able, there was something in the air, he scented with his terrier nose, beyond him. He was torn between deference for the boss, Gerry Clegg, and disgust for this charade. Enid dragged them off to play darts. Bob and Gerry Clegg were left alone. After a time Clegg spoke to him directly. 'I knew your father, lad.'

'I'm finished with that.'

'That's a pity.' What Clegg meant, of course, was you bloody simple idiot. Unless Bob had misunderstood.

'But I've never wanted to leave the Party.'

Clegg surveyed him, sucking his pipe. Apparently it had gone out because Clegg now made a great business, interminably slow, of re-lighting it. First he bashed out the ash, then reached in a waistcoat pocket for an oilskin wallet; the finger he would have used to press down the tobacco was the one cut off at the joint so instead it was the third finger of the right hand he brought to play—generally the weak one and on Clegg's big hand no more developed than usual but extraordinarily dexterous: it was a sensitive, probing, feminine digit on that great male paw. Clegg's whole physical presence, like his hands, seemed designed to mislead you—the impression of ruthless strength and then large brown eyes: the air of simplicity, only a shade too theatrical, the man of the people, the fist clenched, thumping out slogans on those bright platforms so many years ago when Bob was navel-high to these giants. But like a real actor, clever enough to adjust to his audience. Bob guessed that Gerry Clegg would be attractive to women.

The pipe drew at last. Clegg's tone out of a cloud of smoke was entirely reasonable. 'Then what's all the fuss about?'

'If I knew that I wouldn't be here.'

Clegg grunted. 'Comrade Green says you're ill. Is there any truth in that?'

'I'm all right.'

Clegg rambled on about the old days, as if this really were just a chat between friends, calling up the dead, naming names with homespun anecdotes so that the dead seemed more present to Bob in a way than the living: his father yelling for his boots, Moira with the priest at her shoulder drawing him in with her into the black earth, an easy death. 'No one's ever brought it off,' Gerry Clegg advised Bob, privately. 'Once you've been with the Party there's nothing, no other way to live.' His tone now was quiet and undramatic. 'Look, I can't persuade you. I don't

even want to persuade you. But I must warn you, this isn't a commitment anyone can go back on without paying, I've seen what happens. I can see what's happening to you. What I'd like you to do, Comrade, is to come and talk it over quietly with a few of us, tell us what's on your mind. If it's Korea that's stuck in your craw, tell us.'

'You mean I'm to be disciplined at a branch meeting for leaving the Peace Committee? I couldn't have influenced them anyway, you know.'

'I'm sorry you feel that, Comrade. You're talking like some bourgeois intellectual novelist. Your father would have told you, the Party's not inhuman, we're as capable of self-criticism as anyone else. But you've got to remember, the facts of life are crude and they get cruder. We're in a state of war, there's only so much room for emotional scruples. If you'd tell me what it is, what's bothering you . . .'

Bob shook his head. 'I can't. I'm not sure even it's anything to do with the Party . . .'

'You're for us or against us, Comrade, there's nothing in between.' Now Clegg did come out into the open, thump his fist down on to the table. 'What is it? What the bloody hell is the matter with you, man? What do you want?'

His life, his whole reasonable past, all the killing and the hopes of peace, everything he had ever felt, was seen in brilliant vision, and slid away. It seemed an inadequate explanation, but the best he could manage, limp, the end of so much, the beginning of something he was not strong enough yet to contemplate. 'I want to be free,' he said, but he had no idea yet, what he meant by freedom.

Clegg thrust his head forward on his thick neck. Showing himself in his true colours, Bob wondered, or another act, the bully boy jabbing his thumb from the platform at some wretched deviator? 'And who do you think has been working all these years for your precious freedom? The Americans? Churchill? Those pansies on the British Labour Party? The capitalist lackeys who fought your comrades in Malaya, who are fighting your comrades in Korea?'

Bob had to hold himself stiff in his chair. The urge to shrug and to walk away was so strong. Clegg neither impressed him nor intimidated him and any impulse he had felt to confide had left him in the course of this last speech. He saw Clegg now as

merely pathetic. And yet he did owe an explanation, at least, and he struggled to put it in the simplest terms, in language Clegg would grasp. He owed this not to Clegg as an individual, not even to the Party, nor to the memory of his father whose reaction to all this, Bob knew, would have been genuine bewilderment. As he spoke he realised it was to himself he was talking, or rather to the ghost of his former self and now he didn't care if Clegg understood or not. 'I could say it was Prague, or that I admired Tito, or that I couldn't stomach the labour camps or any of the other things we know damn well are going on and have been going on for years. And all that would be true but it wouldn't be any one of those reasons.

'I used to think, if I ever broke with the Party, it would be over one issue, sudden and violent, clean.' Bob smiled bleakly. 'That would be easier, but it wasn't like that. Maybe that's not how people change, if they ever do. I suppose in a way I'm still a communist and I always will be, but that'll be in my heart not my head. I can't work with the Party any more. I'll admit, I'm lost without it, but this is something I've no control over, something that's happened to me. I could go out now in the road and be run over. It would be the same.'

For a second there was a flicker in Gerry Clegg's gaze, almost as if he understood. Then he said coldly: 'That's it then. It's a mercy you're no longer in a position to spread this poison. I take it you've no Party contacts now?'

'Only the Greens.'

'Trade Unions?'

'I'm my own boss now, but I'm sure you know that.' When it comes to the crunch, Bob thought, something saves you, quite unexpectedly, some sense of unreality holds you back from howling or roaring with mad laughter, yelling into Clegg's face that from where he was out in a cold and weightless space, Gerry Clegg looked no bigger than a dirty beetle. Yet he felt obliged to enquire, formally: 'So what happens now? I'm expelled?'

Clegg shrugged himself into his coat. 'We wouldn't bother; so far as we're concerned, Comrade, you no longer exist.' Bob noted the 'Comrade'. The Party, like the hound of heaven, never let go.

The reaction came after, out in the street with Enid, when he was seized by a fit of uncontrollable shivering so that in the taxi

towards which her common sense directed him, he shook so much she was actually driven to chafe his hands, and to hold him like a child, as they made their way home. As they went west they became aware of small explosions, cracks in the night. Their driver, swearing beautifully, had to dodge a couple of fires. Enid was like a child at a picnic. It seemed to Bob, his cheek pressed against the window, that the city was burning.

19

STANDING at Willi's window, Olive saw that in spite of the gales a few yellowed leaves still clung to the apple tree. The fruit had been disappointing; Polly, with the authority of one who had spent a country childhood, said the tree was too old, it would never bear good fruit now, but Olive was sentimentally reluctant to chop it down in its scarred, abundant old age. As the leaves fell away she saw that it had at some point in its life been maimed, perhaps more than once, someone had pruned it so that it was now misshapen. It was against her public, practical nature to make a superstition of the tree and rationally she knew that there was nothing human to be learned from its survival. But it had been part of her vision at a time when she imagined she might control her life and irrationally its continued existence consoled her.

Her attitude to the house was more complicated. Her spirit was bound up with it and over these last few weeks, when Bob had been too ill to work and she had lain awake waiting for him to sleep and then not been able to sleep herself, she had moved in her mind through its rooms. In the same way she also visited other houses; her Aunt Catherine's home in the country where occasionally as a dark, spiky girl she had been happy, away from her mother's theatricals. The cellar on the bomb-site where she and Bob had made a queer, secret home, precious to her. Her first husband's house, memorable not for the shadowy time she had shared with Dennis (how he had faded) but for the chaos of the Connors' room which appalled her competence, her sense of order, but would hold for her always the warm stink of life. She often dreamed of that room or of somewhere like it (for in dreams even the most solidly remembered fabric is normally a little out of joint); and it was an effort to recognise, when she woke, that it no longer existed, any more than the house. When the house was demolished the big room on the first floor simply folded up and slid away, with hardly a sound. She had been

back once and seen the tower block which covered the site, the whole topography of the district changed almost beyond recognition. She had wandered like a ghost among bright shops stuffed with goods, found that the streets were like streets in dreams, almost but not quite the same. Only the children had not changed. The tower block had its own playground, a resident social worker, a clinic, and a laundry in the basement; but the children, when she found them at last, were playing in a row of blast-gutted terrace houses in an area fenced off by barbed wire. They risked their lives every time they went through that fence, but nothing, even guard-dogs, could keep them out. They played ordinary games.

Olive remembered that the few things the Connors had which had been worth keeping when the house was demolished and Dulcie went into a hostel, were stored now in the cellar of the Fulham house. She had forgotten they were there until she was looking for somewhere to keep the apples, and picking her way in the dim light among these few pathetic possessions, she forgot about the apples. A cracked, flowered potty, a frying pan, a few toys, a chair, Tim's books, his revolutionary literature which Olive herself had once found so fascinating and so daunting, a pretty Victorian plate she did not recall, under the dull perfect glaze a rural scene: children outside a cottage playing with a dog, a sturdy woman milking a fat cow, a ploughman driving a pair of horses. The plate reminded Olive of the cottage they had come across on the way back from the Carters' party so long ago—the digging man and the woman in the blue apron. It must have been the Connors' only heirloom. These objects were powerful, if only because Olive saw power in them, felt it through her fingertips as she laid them back in their shavings. It was, of course, absurdly sentimental to imagine that a living connection still ran from these objects to their owners who, less than anyone she knew, had valued possessions. But she ached for Dulcie now, her fecklessness, her courage and her warmth; and she understood that sentimentality is not such a terrible thing; that she had not gone after Dulcie because she preferred her friend as a ghost, intact. She could not face the possibility that Dulcie might have changed.

Willi would sit among his pile of boxes, reading and coughing.

'I don't see why you have to go to Poland.' Edward to Mos-

cow, Rowan to America, Freddy to Africa, they were all scattering, Alan to tramp solemnly round Europe, even Mrs. Armitage to Barnes. But Willi was beyond her, she could not understand. Olive felt more than she would have believed possible about Willi's going; this was a loss. She had helped him pack, discussed the journey reasonably, but now turned on him. 'If you have to go, why not Israel, to your family? I don't understand, there's nothing for you there. What is there in Poland?' Their mentor was leaving them, becoming human, forcing her to see him as a person, which she could not bear.

She was caught out by anger, slanging him like a nagging wife: why go? why Poland? how would he get in and having got in what kind of treatment did he expect? if he were allowed to live how did he imagine he could make a living? everything was stacked against him: communism, anti-semitism, his health. 'You must be out of your mind.'

Olive tried to see Poland in an ordinary way, as a destination, but it was too heavy, too loaded, closed now, an impenetrable country. If you were English and had survived the war, Poland was simply a bead on your liberal, decent rosary, along with so many others. This was absurd. She knew well enough and had seen with her own eyes how people, even in the most terrible circumstances, hung on to the ordinariness of life. But if you extended the image of the house, Poland was the locked, silent room, the ghost country. 'It's not reasonable,' she protested, but was already acknowledging that Willi would go; that he, of all people, had given way to unreason.

So Willi would go, he admitted frankly, for sentimental reasons. He wanted to visit his wife's village again (he himself had been born in the suburbs of Warsaw); she had been the daughter of a colleague in the medical faculty, intelligent, bored with country life, training to be a teacher. The courtship, so far as Olive could gather, had been a slow, bourgeois, formal affair: tedious Sundays in the country, too much to eat, too much coffee, the dark, massive dining room, with the young couple straining to be off together. And once they were free to walk by the canal it was too late, and they were bad tempered with indigestion.

Olive saw all this, the canal, the willow, as clearly as if she had been presented with a photograph; what she could not see was the other vision Willi must hold for ever in his pale opaque

eyes, of his wife carted off to death. 'I suppose,' he said, 'I don't care to stay an exile for the rest of my life.'

There must be so many people, Olive thought, drifting around Europe like this, exiles. Well, life's a state of exile, isn't it, someone had said, every poor sod looking for a home? The young too felt this but their nostalgia was for the future. If Catherine had found a home in Jewishness, how powerfully Willi must be drawn to Poland.

But Willi was a suicide. He was going to Poland to die. His history of the Jews would never be finished. 'You know,' she said, determined to make the best of it, 'I've never left England.' They had reached the most difficult part of his packing: his papers and books. On the stack he had pushed aside to give away or destroy Olive recognised the manuscript, the brown stain from a coffee cup on what she took to be the title page, though she could not decipher the language or the tiny script. 'Surely you're not going to leave this?'

Willi looked up vaguely, his finger still marking the place in some grubby old medical book which had caught his eye. Olive noticed the brown grave-marks on the back of his transparent hand. His movements were still as vigorous, but since he had made his decision, Willi had either surrendered to, or taken on wilfully, certain habits of old age. He was no longer so fastidious about his personal appearance, he had lost interest in the children. 'What should I do with it then?'

'If you won't let me show it to Edward Carter, as I suggested, then at least take it with you.'

There was a flare of his old sarcasm. 'I thought you were the one who said we shouldn't drag our history around with us?'

'Yes, and I meant that, of course, at the time. I'm not so sure now. Honestly, I don't know if one has any choice.' That press of ghosts, she still did not understand them or the meaning—if there was a meaning at all—of her vision, the ruined city, the streets she preferred to avoid. Life did not stay in neat compartments. For a Jew, born in this century, there was no such thing as a private life. Catherine had told her, even her parents-in-law, Moshe and Sara, had their plans made and paid for as early as 1936. They had made up reasons for not going to America, perhaps they were simply tired of running. Their family had a history of exile which went back not decades but centuries; it might not have been courage which kept Moshe

and Sara in England but the inherited memory of homelessness and exhaustion. 'But if you feel that,' she persisted, 'why did you write it at all?' What she meant was, why bother with the children of Israel if you are planning to die yourself?

Willi was seized by a fit of coughing. When he had caught his breath he explained. 'I had a patient once who was dying of a fatal disease; I forget her name or even where it was—Poznan, I think. Anyway, it was bad, of course—she was quite young—and there was a great deal of pain, but it seemed to us that she was suffering more than she should. My colleagues insisted that she was an hysteric and they doubled the sedation, but I felt that she was troubled in some other way. Finally she admitted to me that she could stand it all much better if only someone would explain what was happening to her and why she was particularly susceptible to this disease.'

Olive shuddered. 'I'd ask the same question, but I'm not sure I'd really want to know.'

'Naturally. So would any intelligent person but they do not always benefit from the truth. In this case I took a risk and gave her the whole history. I explained to her quite honestly that there was no cure and no reason yet known to medical science why a common ailment should prove fatal in her case. She accepted this and it seemed to help her. I never heard how she died. I often wonder if I was right.'

'I don't know,' Olive said, and she repeated: 'I don't know.'

So Willi was leaving and they were moving now, whether they wished it or not, towards the time when they would be alone together. Since Bob's illness the children had been with Catherine and though Olive went to see them every day and Polly as often as she could, and Mrs. Armitage once a week (and then there was Daphne Wright and Jack's wife), most of her life was a heavy waiting for Bob to recover or not to recover; or to leave her.

On Bonfire Night Olive had lingered with her mother in the little room at Barnes, partly from guilt, but also because it seemed to her that this, though only a temporary parting, might be crucial, as if something important remained to be said between them. 'Well, at least you have a room of your own,' she said, and as the sturdy young nurse thumped in and out with blankets, information and cheerfulness, Olive saw her mother

for the first time in years, painfully, no longer as a threat but as a separate person with her own history and destiny. Seen in these terms, she was an old woman, reduced, soon to die, not without courage. If she had been a stranger Olive's response would have been warm and immediate.

When the nurse had gone and everything had been put away they were left together to make some kind of parting. Still, Olive could not bring herself to kiss this other person. 'If there's anything you need...'

But Mrs. Armitage was already settling down in this ghastly room, to die, and that, she implied, was something she could do quite well by herself.

Elizabeth was screaming. Olive showed her the fireworks and talked about them quietly but wondered if she had infected the child with her own fear. They had been dulled, drugged by peace, but now, like a body recovering from an anaesthetic, they were all nerves, or so it seemed to Olive. Or was it that you saw what you looked for? For each Mavis dying badly, for every Daphne Wright fearful to leave her house, you could see every day a dozen complacent young matrons bowling their prams out in the brisk morning air. And they were not stupid women. Alan's Sheila was not stupid, she simply wanted to be happy. While Alan was planning to leave a society he found alien, all the Peter Prices were doing very nicely from the bomb, thank you. Articles were already being written about articles about the bomb-crazed fifties; bomb jokes were fashionable. Apparently people could get used to anything. Elizabeth slept at last and Bob came home.

Remember, remember, the fifth of November, with gunpowder, treason and plot. Tim Connor would appreciate that. Who the hell was Guy Fawkes anyway? Basically a loser. Bob allowed Enid to deliver him and for once she showed some tact and left them alone.

'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

'It's finished.'

'I'm sorry. I really am very sorry.'

'I never thought it would be like this.'

For days on end he slept or lay on his bed, at least, contem-

plating the ruin of his life; wishing his life were grand enough to be ruined, refusing to see a doctor, visited by shades, making the interminable journey from the bed to the window. From here he could see Olive moving around the garden, calling to the children, hanging out washing, then looking up for him, the low sun too bright in her face, so that he would appear to her only as a shadow in the window. He sat very still, holding his melting body together. Searching in a drawer for his pills, he found the postcards, the mad signals Tim Connor had sent out to them in the spring of last year. They made a weird collection, some not irrational, some, as his condition worsened, cryptic and barely decipherable. THE RABBLE WILL SCREW THE STATE LOVE FROM SIBERIA SIGNED MICHAEL BAKUNIN. Then written by hand, the large, childish capitals falling off the card: *The cost of living is too great. There will be fires. The ice is cracking.*

'So what happens now?' Olive asked. 'Do you hand in your card?'

Bob rubbed his hand across his face, managed some kind of smile. 'Apparently that's not necessary. I have been officially informed that I no longer exist.'

'Oh, love, those bloody stupid little men.'

'Where are the children?'

'I took them to Catherine's. They'll be all right. She'll send them back fat as prize pigs.'

'I'm sorry you had to send them away.'

She put her hands on his shoulders. 'If only you could tell me.'

'If I could understand myself.'

'It's dark. Will you come down?'

She brought them something to eat and he swallowed because that would make her happy, or at least not so desolate, and she began to talk about the past, about Willi going, then she could not hide her misery and she was crying and holding on to him, begging him in the most crudely sentimental terms, not to betray the deep love between them, not to forget how much they had hoped for, not to leave her, not to go away.

Immediately she was ashamed. She went to the bathroom, splashed her eyes with cold water and thumped powder on her face. There was a sharp frost tonight and the mirror was

clouded, the bathroom icy (while the children were away they had not bothered to light the oil stove). Olive thought automatically, before winter we'll have to get the pipes lagged. But it was already winter: there had been snow in Cumberland or Northumberland or somewhere. She saw winter moving down implacably from the north to cover the country, she remembered the bitter wind from the High Peak in Derbyshire where Elizabeth had been born, her own state of funk, stranded between a dead marriage and the possibility of a new one.

But these fears, she wondered, dragging the brush through hair which had been neither washed nor cut for a month, these present fears could not be so easily defined or dismissed. And yet before they could be dismissed, before she could help Bob calmly as he needed to be helped, from strength, these terrors had to be defined.

She left the white-faced frantic woman in the bathroom, went upstairs, snapped on all the lights, poured them both a stiff drink and sat down by the stove to sew. She was turning an old dress of her own into a smock for Elizabeth. While Bob drank and the tension eased for the moment, Olive tried to draw him back, by gossip, into the real world as it is accepted. Edward was the worm who turned. Apparently Polly was dead against this trip, she seemed to imagine that no one who went beyond the iron curtain ever came back. But Edward was determined to go to Moscow.

Olive talked, as if she were certain of a future between them, of his recovery, about an Eisenstein film they had both seen before but was on now at the Classic. 'Was that the one? Do you remember? The ice cracking?' She sat back, frowning with the effort of remembrance, also because the light was too dim, really, for sewing. 'The noise when the ice broke, it was extraordinary, like cannons. You'd have thought it would just melt but this was so violent.' There was also the woman—though was that the same film?—searching the battlefield for her dead lovers and the one who lived she would marry. 'If you felt up to it, when Willi's gone, we could borrow the cottage again.'

His face was a pale disc on the edge of the light. 'I like to see you sew.'

'It's cold, isn't it, even with the stove? It's marvellous to be on our own but in a funny way I miss the children. There's a heap of ironing to do. You know, I'm not sure this was such a

good idea,' she said, meaning the smock. She snapped the thread and looked across at him slumped in the armchair like an old man, and so they returned, both making an effort not to speak of it, to the true theme of this quiet domestic period. The peace which had contained them was broken for ever, they knew that as surely as if their bivouac had fallen down around them; and yet they talked about their childhoods, which had been such worlds apart, and of their friends and their children. Olive said, she had thought a lot about the Connors lately. 'I've wondered if you'd like to live in the country?' Then, seeing his baffled face, she did something which would have been beyond her a few years, even a few months ago. With an abrupt, clumsy gesture, she thrust the sewing from her lap, walked across the room and took his face in her hands, his tired head. 'Those bloody men! They have no right to do this to you.'

'I'll explain. But I can't understand yet.'

She squatted down on her haunches in front of him and grasped his hands. 'Of course you will. Come on now, upstairs.' She prised apart his clenched fists and kissed his palms. Then she turned, now on her knees, to riddle and shut the stove.

'I'll be better,' he said and as he rose he reached to draw her up so that they stood face to face. 'You know you're my love, my only love.'

Olive told Alan that there was no point at all in putting off his trip. 'It would be absurd. There's nothing you can do here.'

They had met at the corner of the street, Olive returning from her daily visit to the children. One of the small problems she had to hide from Bob was how much this separation disturbed her, or rather how painful it was to visit them and then to leave them. Paul had settled down marvellously, he was king of the household, the charmer; Elizabeth too seemed to be doing well but when Olive tried to kiss her, she sensed a stiffness, a resistance, and she knew that Elizabeth felt herself betrayed.

Alan was standing under the lime tree so that as Olive turned the corner she ran straight into him. In spite of the bitter wind he was wearing only jeans and a thin jacket. It was dark already at five o'clock and Olive, walking fast with her hands thrust into her pockets and her head down, was startled.

'Sorry if I scared you. Where's the car?'

'It packed up, I don't know why. Jack's supposed to be bring-

ing it back later. How long have you been waiting? Are you coming in?'

'I wasn't sure. How is he?'

'The same.' When Alan seemed reluctant to follow her into the house, she said, keeping any colour out of her voice, 'He doesn't like to be alone too much.' For some reason, defensive perhaps, she felt shy with the boy. 'Willi's with him, I think, but I'd rather get in. Unless you want to freeze to death.'

'It's funny. I've got fond of this street.' They stood for a moment looking up at the house. Now the leaves had fallen from the trees it seemed smaller, defenceless. The house opposite had been empty since the summer and in the last few weeks, quite suddenly, the garden had become a wilderness, window panes had been smashed by stealth at night, and someone said, tramps were sleeping there and one old man had been found dead, the night of the first frost.

'I hope someone's kept the stove in.' Olive took Alan into the kitchen, which was always warm. 'There's no need to see him, you know.' She made chocolate for him, tea for herself; 'when do you leave, then?'

'I don't have to go at all.'

'Of course you'll go, you've got to live your own life. You'll have a warm Christmas, at least. Certainly better than Korea would have been.'

Alan nodded. 'You know, in a way, I wish I'd been called up. That would have been a simple issue.' He did not speak easily of himself, they discussed Bob and Olive confessed how much she missed the children, told him about Willi going; then Alan admitted, he was leaving the next day, alone, there was nothing in England for him. 'If you think it'll be all right?'

'Bob, you mean?' Olive stirred her tea, though lately she had given up sugar; there was something jagged and harsh about this boy which always put her at a disadvantage. Nothing so simple as the proverbial chip on the shoulder, though he could be quietly bloody minded. More a strangled intensity, a way he had of carrying his body, even in repose, as if he were constantly nerved to resist attack. She had seen exiles, like Willie, walk in the same way; and, like blind men, their hearing was unusually developed, you could not take them by surprise. And yet Alan, like his father, was capable of gentleness, she had seen that in his behaviour with Sheila, and with the children. 'I honestly

don't believe anyone can help him much. I think he'll work through it.' She wanted to get upstairs to Bob, she had not the energy for this conversation, if it was a conversation. He was going to Europe, nothing would stop him, so why should she clear his conscience for him? Then she was ashamed again. He was Bob's son, by no means as self-contained as he appeared.

'And I'm the last one to help.' His shoulders in the awful, thin jacket were hunched now, he was asking, she supposed, for her shriving. And if she gave it he would resent it. So she began to clear away the cups. She guessed he was lingering in the hope that his father might come down but he would not go up to see Bob. By tomorrow he would be in France, by Christmas Spain, or Italy. She saw him, half-starved, sharp eyes, in a country she had never seen.

Bob and Willi were sitting in the dark. They told her, with pride, that they had kept the stove in. They seemed eager to please her. In this room she was conscious of the weight, the solidity of her body, the frailty of the two men and her own unreasonable, apparently pointless survival. She told Bob, she had met Alan in the street, he was probably going abroad quite soon. The peace and sadness of sitting round the stove, and her tiredness, made her ponder what it would be like to live for ever like this, by your own hearth. 'I wonder if there'll ever by revolution in England?'

Willi thought not. Marx had been wrong there, Bakunin right. Africa perhaps?

'Freddy M'buto! But he's so respectable?' They ate by the fire, plates on their laps. When the wind was in the north the stove roared and died unless you watched it. 'But can you imagine it? Everything gone, nothing safe? I mean, even at the worst times in the war we never really had to face the idea of order collapsing, the kind of upheaval of society they had in Russia. I wonder what would have happened if the Germans had come. Hitler was sentimental about England, wasn't he? I've an awful feeling we might have got used to it, rather quickly. Or perhaps not.' She was talking idly, thoughtlessly, at random, simply to drive away the silence, to keep warm, also to rouse the two men. When she looked at Bob, who had hardly moved or spoken all evening, she saw a man flinging himself again and again against a wall, wavering, like someone she had seen in the war, at the

top of a burning building, falling silently through space, grabbing at tufts of the bottomless dark.

Bob said: 'It would have been a bloodbath. It's just as well we never had to find out.'

Olive smiled and yawned, the fire had made her drowsy. 'You mean Churchill in some Scottish dug-out, holding forth on the short-wave?'

'Something like that.'

'Polly making tea,' she mused. 'It's not very long ago but it all seems so unlikely. D'you know, I remember now, they were setting up Resistance cells. I'd quite forgotten, it was all organised, couriers, everything. It was played down, of course, terribly British. I remember thinking, this was absurd, unreal. The truth is, quite a lot of people were having the time of their lives.' She shivered, although the fire was now burning brightly. 'Well, history passed us by, I suppose,' she said, 'which may be just as well. And now we'll never know.'

Willi had brought down a small portable chess set, a rosewood box which opened out into a board and contained minutely carved ivory and ebony figures. He had never shown this to them before and this gesture, whether or not he intended to give it to them, was meant as a parting gift. Or perhaps this was simply therapy for Bob who had never played but enjoyed the feeling of the shapes: the angry queen, the vulnerable and beautiful king. Bob admired the workmanship, alive and interested for the first time that evening; Olive wondered why the queen was so violent. Willi outlined the rules, the ploys, explained, 'It was originally a war game, I believe. It has a long history, a language of its own.'

He was laying out the pieces. Olive went to clear away the plates and listen for the children, until she remembered they were not there. She spent as long as she could making the coffee. This slackness, this tension: no wonder the queen was in a rage, roaring all over the board; and when she was done what did she have but an empty chequered country and the tired king? When she went up with the coffee they were still playing, had reached stalemate, though it seemed likely Willi had given something away. In any case, he would not have coffee. Jack turned up with the car. Mavis was much better. She might even outlive them all.

Olive damped down the stove. She went to the window and

drew the curtains, looking out, finding no message in the night. Bob had gone to bed though not to sleep. It was not impossible, in this weather, to imagine that the wrecked house opposite had indeed been looted by vandals, that the lamps whose beam wavered and was melted in the driving rain, were torches. Standing at the window in the dark, Olive pushed down the casement for a moment—the rain was slanting across now, hardly falling but driven. She listened for the creaking of the trees, saw the high scudding sky; here, as if a curfew had been called, there was no one abroad, no dogs being walked, milk bottles put out, drunks swaying home; from this cul-de-sac the sounds of the city were always muffled and tonight they might have truly been cut off in some secret country bivouac. Were it not for the furnace glow which always, even in the blackest weather, hung over the city. Olive used to find this consoling, then for a long time she hardly noticed it. Now, for reasons she could not grasp, as though she were dreaming or remembering some catastrophe she had forgotten, she saw the red sky as an image of fire below, houses burning, a man toppling and falling, a woman with a dead child in her arms crushed beneath a beam, the thud of feet, blazing torches, revolution in the streets.

20

AFTER a week Bob made an attempt to go back to the garage It was the first time he had been out since Bonfire Night and as it was a crisp day he set out about eleven in the morning to walk. He did not feel up to coping with customers yet but there was plenty he could do in the office. Though he still felt weak, as from a physical illness, and had cut himself shaving, the bright sky and clean-smelling air invigorated him. Everything seemed to have a sharper dazzling brilliant quality, though a queer flatness and lack of dimension, as if the chimneys had been painted on the sky and the houses were merely façades. He saw a girl in a window between dingy curtains arranging flowers in a vase; she looked up and smiled, for him or for the flowers, and he was filled with unreasoning optimism. Of course he felt feeble after a week's inactivity but there was probably nothing really wrong with him at all. He'd simply been brooding too much, he might have had a touch of flu, that would explain all the minor physical symptoms. He'd get back to work and this evening he'd make it up to Olive—at the corner of the street he bought a bunch of late chrysanthemums to take back to her. They were bronze and had a sharp, slightly acid tang, not unpleasant. He'd never cared much for chrysanthemums, in fact he had never looked at flowers till now.

He had to wait at the lights to cross. He took a wrong turning though he had walked this way a hundred times. The garage was farther than he had remembered, an ambulance came yelling past, someone said there had been a street accident, a woman said it was a fire a few streets away. By the time he reached the garage it took all the effort of will he had left to check his panic, not to cry out; there was a sharp pain in his chest, he was sweating and he wondered if he was having a heart attack. Jack took one look at him: 'What the hell are you doing here? You're sick. I'll get the boy to drive you back.'

In the car Bob sat with the ragged blooms still clutched to his

chest. The boy had the sense not to try and talk. Olive saw at once what had happened. 'I'm calling the doctor. Go and lie down. Here, drink this, though it's probably the last thing you should have.' He took a sip of brandy and gagged, then he lay back on the sofa. When she came back from the telephone he was lying there, fast asleep, snoring like a drunk, his face buried in the crushed flowers.

The doctor said if Bob didn't want to see a specialist it would be a mistake to force him. A month off work would probably do the trick. He didn't think much of these trick cyclists himself. Keep taking the pills.

After all it was Polly not Bob who went to see Miss Fraser. Every time lately Olive rang her she was quite normal, friendly, but very busy, she explained, with the dogs and the new house. 'Honestly, I'm so busy.' Of course Olive understood and was privately thankful, she needed all her energy for Bob. Then one afternoon Polly telephoned: Olive was to come for tea. She used her committee voice, the one Tim Connor once mocked with loving spite. Olive replied that she would love to, next week perhaps? Today, Polly said. She didn't ask about Bob. She would expect Olive in half an hour.

At first Olive was angry, then amused, then determined not to go. While the children were away she had been repainting Elizabeth's room. The rest of the time she found jobs, mostly sewing and mending, that would leave her free for Bob, if he wanted to talk, or listen to music, or if, as she sensed, he could not bear to be alone. Since his collapse their life had fallen into a kind of ritual, first improvised, then imperative, for her even more than for him, as if by giving a shape to their days she were reconstructing a shelter around them. This period, without children, without obligations except to one another, reminded her of the time before they were married when they had made that strange, secret home in a cellar. In the end she could not settle to anything. 'I won't be long. You know Polly, one of her royal commands.'

Polly must have been watching for her because before she could even touch the bell the door of the new house opened and Olive knew she had been right to come Polly, with the pug dogs yapping round her feet, was wearing an old dressing-gown. She led the way up to the uncarpeted stairs. 'So you decided to

come, after all.'

'Of course I've come.' It was a beautiful house, eighteenth century, looking on to the river. 'Very grand.' She walked to the window and remarked on the view. There seemed nothing else she could do, having appreciated, in one moment of shock, the high first-floor room, a room of beautiful proportions, jagged, unhemmed curtains, furniture covered in dust sheets, dog shit on the bare boards.

'It's frightful at the moment, but of course we'll get it straight.'

'Of course.'

'I thought we'd have a drink. You don't like tea, do you? We haven't got tea anyway.'

'I'd like a drink.'

'We've only got vodka.' Polly now stirred herself. Resentfully at first, it seemed, then with a curious heavy deliberateness, she dragged an upturned tea chest to serve as a table between them, placed on it a bottle of vodka, half empty, and two glasses, one sticky; she seemed very concerned with some exactly formulated arrangement and frowned until she was satisfied with the relationship between the bottle, the glasses, a grimy saucer which served as an ashtray and the battered packet of cigarettes she drew from her pocket. Then she poured the drinks, precisely three-quarters of the way up each glass and sank back in her shrouded chair. A wheezing pug climbed on to her lap, she drank and began to talk in a bright social voice which anyone who did not know her well might have mistaken for her normal tone. 'I'm terribly glad you could come. To tell you the truth,' she confided, 'I get rather bored. There's so much to do one hardly knows where to start. But you must come round, both of you, when we're straight.'

'What about the committees?'

'Bloody women,' said Polly in the same brittle voice 'I tell you, Olive, I'm sick of women Oh, not you, Olive, I admire you. You know I've always admired you, don't you? Nothing scares you, does it, nothing at all?'

Olive shook her head. 'I don't know about that.'

Polly was still smiling. 'But it's true. Everyone says how strong, how brave you are.'

Olive forced herself to look up straight at Polly and saw how her breast was slopping out of her dressing-gown, the blind

aureole of the nipple brown and spread. Her belly would be veined now from the child but she still had this rich, if pointless fullness. For some women, like Polly, however corseted and held in, the body remained guileless. 'If you mean Edward, there's nothing to that. He talked to me, he was simply worried about you. I don't see myself as admirable.'

Polly filled her glass. She was clearly drunk, had probably been drinking all day, yet she seemed more or less in control of herself. Olive took a risk: 'Look, if we start now we could clear up this room in an hour.'

Polly looked up and said in a matter-of-fact voice, like a bored child repeating its lesson, 'It's no good, I'm not a wife for him, we'll never be straight. You must realise that, Olive, I'm not like you, I can't get it right. He's going to Moscow because we live like this now.'

'You're imagining things, Polly, you're tired. You haven't got over the baby.' Working on intuition Olive stubbed out her cigarette, walked over to Polly and gripped her shoulders. 'You've got to understand that the baby is dead. Edward is going to Moscow, the baby was born dead, you're tired, but you have friends and we'll help you until you're better. It's you Edward wants, not a house or a family. You will be better but first you've got to accept that the baby is dead, it was never really alive, that's all.' Even as she spoke Olive couldn't help thinking, and why the hell should she accept it? Polly had as much right to become a raving madwoman as Willi had to go to Poland. Polly's ghosts, her hopes, had been as much a part of her as her politics, the texture of her skin, her kindnesses and her prejudices. Perhaps survival was overrated and yet one hung on to it, thrust it on others like a virtue.

'Yes, you're right,' Polly said meekly, 'I'm just tired.' Then she twisted her head away in an ugly, wrenching movement and making no effort to cover her face began to cry with the most terrible, violent openness.

Olive rang Edward that evening. He said Polly seemed calmer than she had been for weeks. She was sleeping, they were grateful. 'At least she admits now that she's ill. Which is halfway to being cured, I suppose.' Edward sounded exhausted. He was not the kind of man who admitted his sorrows easily, he was a stoic for himself and would like to extend his good-tempered endur-

ance to others, but this was not possible. He was ashamed, diminished, that he could not understand Shuklov's morphine or Polly's extravagant grief. He would have made a gift of his courage, if he could.

Olive suggested Miss Fraser. Polly knew her already, she might trust her. 'But Polly's not mad, you know, don't worry too much.'

In the morning Olive asked Catherine to go with her to Polly's. On the way she explained, she wasn't sure what they would find when they got there. Did Catherine really feel up to it?

'If you mean my interesting condition, I'm terribly well. But you don't mean that, do you?'

'Not exactly.

They were sitting in the car outside Polly's house. With her hand on the door, Catherine said, 'You needn't worry, that truly is all over. I honestly think I'll be all right now. I get scared sometimes but it's only like being in a haunted house, you get used to it. That's all mother seems to me nowadays, just a ghost.' Going up the steps she pecked Olive's cheek; it was unusual for them to touch. 'Poor Olive, you have a hard time with us all, don't you?'

Olive had really been afraid of what they might find: theatrical visions of Polly dead, knife, razor, rope, pill, gas, all the fears she thrust down every time she went home to Bob, this business with Polly had brought them all into the open so that she, who had always been the soul of reason, would have liked to run from this house.

But Polly was quite prepared to see Miss Fraser, Olive was right, she said, and her meekness was more appalling than her raving. She was ready to be cured. Olive was thankful to be relieved of one responsibility; but going home she wondered what she had done to Polly; how could anyone, ever, be cured of life?

He would wake, from habit, with his hand on her thigh, and once, having dreamed happily, he made love to her but afterwards they were left desolate, full of tenderness. He was astonished how rich her body had become, what snail tracks the children had made over her belly, which she did not like him to see, so she curled up like a sea-creature left stranded when the

tide has gone out. They talked quietly, forgetting the children were away. 'I still listen for them. I keep thinking I can hear them. It's like being haunted. I got up and went into Paul's room last night.'

'Why don't you fetch them back tomorrow?'

'No,' she murmured. 'No ... soon.' Then vaguely, reaching for her cigarettes on the bedside table so that the sheet fell away and the heaviness of her breasts was exposed: 'Have you thought any more about going to the cottage? Did I tell you, the Greens are giving it up? Enid more or less said we could have it, they're too busy or country pleasures have lost their charm for her or something. It's extraordinary what fads solemn people can have. She'll invent as worthy a theory for giving it up as she had for taking it on. It's just a matter of transferring the rent apparently, and it's dirt cheap.'

'When did you see Enid?'

'I didn't. She rang to ask about you and she happened to mention it.'

Bob smiled. 'And you took it on.'

'Well, yes. I did in a way. But I'm sure Enid wouldn't hold us to it.' Now she turned to him, wishing she had some guile. She was so open to him she could not hide how much she wanted the cottage.

'I don't see why we shouldn't take it.' The bivouac, he thought; so simple to make her happy, he could see she was already planning and perhaps for the first time in months she was truly carefree for the moment at least.

She sat up in bed hugging her knees. 'We could go down there while the children are away? Or perhaps not, in this weather. The pipes would be frozen, there's no proper fire. I suppose we could put in a stove before next winter.' Then she stubbed out her cigarette, lay back and talked on quietly about the small changes they could make, the Greens had neglected it so much, the flowers she could grow, how the children would love it. He listened as if she were telling him a story, and that night at least he slept well.

There were a few quiet days of calm weather, the sky citrous in the morning then a little drizzle around midday and dusk about four, when Willi left. It seemed so strange to Olive that anyone could simply walk out of the house at four o'clock on a

winter afternoon and go to Poland. Not that he was to go at once to Poland, he explained; this would not, in any case, have been possible. He was to go first to West Berlin, then to friends, a doctor and his family in the Soviet zone. His friends would help him to get papers, a search would have to be requested in Warsaw to trace his birth certificate, his right to be Polish. This could take months, but from East Berlin he stood a better chance.

Olive had long given up trying to dissuade him. 'And if you can't get papers?'

'There are ways across the border. I shall be well placed. I shouldn't mind so much seeing the Oder by moonlight.'

She answered his dryness. 'It's so theatrical.'

'Not really. It happens all the time, you might be surprised. There's quite an international network for the lost tribes. Though I have no intention of swimming.'

She tried to see it, how you could live like that, but it was beyond her, what would become of Willi.

In the end she admitted to Bob: 'I never dared to ask him about Treblinka, what happened to his wife. I'm ashamed of that. Did he ever talk to you?'

'Not much.'

'He must have loved her, to do this?'

'I gather it started well, but it was an ordinary marriage, nothing special.'

'And the camp?'

'He said it was one of the worst, that was all. The children were sent away in time to friends in Austria who smuggled them to Switzerland, then when they were grown, after the war, they got into Israel, somehow. Willi's wife wouldn't leave Poland, then it was too late. Willi survived, he said, by practising his profession. He was quite clever. He attended the whores from Warsaw who entertained the troops, he had privileges. Then there was the revolt and the Russians came. That's all I know.'

After Willi left Olive was seized by anger. She made a bonfire in the garden and burned his indecipherable manuscript, first leaf by leaf then in bundles. The smoke made her cough but the ground was too damp for a good fire and she had to pour paraffin before the flames leaped up. Even then, when it was all burned up and she had bathed and washed her hair and put on

a clean dress, she found it hard to sit quietly by the stove, for the smell of burning.

It was an irrational, destructive act, quite contrary to her nature, an act of vandalism she could not justify to herself any more than she could explain the anger which motivated it and the subsequent strange feeling of relief, almost of happiness. Why had she done it? She had no idea, except that the bitch instinct had driven her to it and was now as smug within her as a pleased cat. And the other part of her, her austere rationality, while it disapproved of the extravagance of the gesture, did not torment her, let her go, in fact, with the suggestion that in leaving her the manuscript, forbidding publication, Willi had intended her to destroy it. But she would be troubled later all the same, she knew, by the impertinence of those who say of the dead: he would have wished it.

All this was going through her mind as they followed their imperative routine and standing at the sink she saw Bob out in the garden prodding the ashes with his foot. But curiosity was the first healthy impulse he had lost and he did not ask, just as he did not ask about Polly or Alan or the children; though Olive spoke of them in a conversational way, with the vague idea in her head that it was important to insist upon some kind of contact, however vicarious, with life outside. Bob in his state of depression and withdrawl reminded her less of Polly or anyone else she knew who had been mentally ill, than of a few long-term prisoners she had seen when she visited her brother, Chris, in prison after the war. One in particular, whose young wife was loving and talked to him cheerfully of their family and friends; the man nodded, gave an appearance of listening, but his eyes were blank as if she were speaking of a foreign country. There were some, Chris told her, who were happily married but refused to see their wives at all. Among these were a number of recidivists: men who would be released only to commit another crime within months. Prison had become their world and Bob, she guessed, for this time at least, felt the same, and must somehow, gently, even violently, be roused from this withdrawal. Perhaps she had been wrong to send the children away?

A card came from Alan in Paris, he had found a job as a night porter in an American hospital and would go on to Holland, or perhaps south. Olive tried to read a message between

the lines but it was as bland and formal as a greeting from a stranger. No help there. Once when Bob spoke to Elizabeth on the telephone Olive had seen a flicker of animation, of attentiveness in his face, as if he had rested for a moment in his blank fall from space to look down at the earth and recognise a familiar coastline or some friendly signal. But when he rang off she saw that the effort had been too much for him, he was greyer and more haggard than before.

Yet he must be roused. Olive asked Sheila Robbins to come and, on an impulse, David Wright. Meanwhile, instinctively, she got him when she could to talk of the past. If Bob was holding off the present, history might do as well, so when he was at his least frantic, in the evening, she asked him about Moira, his first wife, and the war. She scented that the two were inseparable in his mind. 'D'you ever think of her now?'

'Not much.' Later he admitted, as if the conversation had never been broken off, 'quite a lot lately. I used to blame the war, her religion, my politics, but mostly the war. I didn't think much about history but when I did I saw it as some kind of storm trooper, breaking everything, tearing private life apart.' This confession was delivered not as a single fluent statement but a broken sentence in jabs of speech.

Olive watched him, stiff, his hands nailed to the arms of the chair. She waited for him to go on. 'You've never talked much about yourself, have you?'

'I've never thought much about myself. I'm making up for it now. Queer about history. You were right, you said it had passed us by. Politically all we can do now is go down decently, that's what Alan and his lot are on about really—they don't like politics and they don't like impotence, either. They're stuck now, but they may find some better way and good luck to them. What they don't see, is that it's bound to be political, one way or another. To say you don't believe in politics is a political statement.'

They were quiet for a while. Olive said, 'I can't see that but I understand it. I don't know anything about you. You were fond of your father, weren't you? But I can't see that, I can't imagine your childhood.'

The smell of ironing, the sweet time with Moira by the river, the old man's black nets; a march, a meeting, a policeman on a horse, a man falling, falling. Legs like a moving forest and his

father's hand. 'You can't imagine what it was like: to be right, a simple issue. My father made no distinction between politics and private life, he never needed to make the distinction ... You know, the same feeling a lot of people had in the war, it justified their lives. That's how it was for my father with the Party and for me at first—there was no gulf then between a man's political life and his ordinary human hopes for himself and his family. Not for people like us, anyway. Afterwards everything was changed ... nothing you could put your finger on. Well, there was Czechoslovakia and the Tito business and stories out of the Soviet Union like we used to get from Spain and Germany. But it wasn't just that, none of us had ever thought the C.P. was the Sally Army ... Maybe I was the one who changed.'

'And the war? You hardly ever talk about that.'

'There never seemed much point in talking about it. I survived. It was so many years out of my life, my youth, I suppose, but it was the same for millions. It got Moira's priests off my tail, it meant I never had to give her the showdown she wanted and for a woman like her that was cruel, I see now. You know what happened—the baby, how Moira died. I've never really known what Alan felt about all that.

'Then after the war I couldn't face the idea that I'd changed, not for a long time ... As I said, I blamed the war for what it did to my marriage but that didn't last. I began to feel responsible for Moira, guilty, and the worst part of it was, she was dead, so I was stuck with that guilt for ever. Us being right, that helped at first, then somehow it made it worse ... loving you made me face the fact that I'd never loved Moira. Alan knew that, children know these things before you can see them yourself. That's why he'll never take my love, nothing I could ever do or say, all the love I want to give him: he'll never accept it. And I've refused to fight him as I refused to fight Moira, that must make it worse.' Although he had held himself rigidly stiff through all this, the impression Olive had listening and watching him, was of someone racked, violent movement constrained, a seizure which showed itself only in the odd physical tremor and his fierce grip on the chair arms. If only he could break down, cry like Polly. Instead he smiled, he wasn't used to talking like this, he had almost forgotten her presence, his mind was so turned inward. 'Maybe that's what they mean by the life ever-

lasting, the dead never let go, do they?'

She was afraid to speak, to light a cigarette for him, to touch his hand, to break into this appalling privacy. Though she felt they had not, probably never would, come to the crunch. 'But it isn't just Moira?'

He shook his head. 'I can stand that now, thinking about it so much, talking about it, I can almost live with it, which means in a way I'm free of it. It's the same with the Party, what I felt for my father I never had the chance to show, how my grandfather scared me, he was a sort of darkness.' She stood, quietly covering his hands.

'You musn't take so much on yourself. Everyone feels this, everyone has a part of themselves they find hard to accept. Change must hurt.'

Now he did seize her hands and held on to them until he could stop shivering. Later Olive got them something to eat, then she tried to ring Catherine, as she did every night to ask about the children, but the line was out of order. The light flickered then the electricity was cut off so they were thankful for the stove which gave both light and heat. They were very close that evening but in a strange way, Olive felt: like Russians sitting down for good luck before they go on a journey.

21

TOWARDS the end of that week Bob forced himself to go out alone and walk around the streets for half an hour. Rather than wander aimlessly, he set himself a target: the river. It was far enough to challenge him but not so far as to exhaust him. Yet though he knew the route well, must have cut through these suburban groves of villas and terraces a hundred times, he felt he had never come this way before. The hallucinatory brilliance which had elated him on the day of his collapse was replaced by another vision. Each step, simply to put one foot before the other, was an effort of will, but while this occupied his courage his eyes were free and they saw not the new prosperous London, the houses bright with fresh paint, the young women calling their children in to tea, but the sooty patches of gardens, the trees stripped bare, all the colour gone from the sky; and that rotten, sweet smell of vegetable decay: in smog there was also a nip of sulphur. And the people in the streets—a man with a terrible burn stain, those pinched, angry faces, whining children. The women's voices were too high, like mad birds. The river, which had drawn him, cured him so often, for he had never lived far from it, was bitter. Yet it was beautiful too, giving off pale swirling breaths of mist, which would join soon with the filth in the sky and become, as dusk thickened, a miasma.

By the time he was halfway home the fog pressed in pads against his eyes, his ears and his mouth, and he had to feel his way like a blind man, tapping with his foot against a wall or a railing.

The city was suddenly quiet, its voice stuffed, traffic hardly moving on the main road, the groves empty except for wraiths conjured by the mist. *As far as we're concerned, Comrade, you no longer exist.* There ought to be a liturgy, Olive had murmured, a form of words, and he wished in a way she had not understood. Someone walking one foot on the pavement the

other in the gutter, dot one, carry one, cursing: shit, shit. Then little lights, a black door, a church Bob had never noticed before and a brave Christmas tree, too soon. When I am troubled, said a man he used to respect, I call on the name of Stalin. Bob went into the church and sat for a while in the shadows at the back, resting in the warmth, the music, the bright colours of the idols, and the sweet coniferous scent. He was grateful for the warmth and light but though he bowed his head he could no more have prayed than denied his own nature, or kissed the shabby little tree.

Stumbling with weariness, he caught a bus for the last half mile home but found this was the rush hour, so he had to stand. His triumph at having performed this ordinary, human, every-day act, dissolved and was replaced by horror at the press of steaming bodies—terror first as he lurched for the swinging strap, then as he was pushed farther down the bus a surge of rage so intense he had to clench his will against the impulse to scythe his way down to the platform, literally cut his way out. The spasm passed, he opened his eyes, and was curious to see that he had half raised one hand and it was shaking so much he could hardly grope for the fare. For the rest of the way home he kept one hand in his pocket, like a man with a deadly knife to hide.

Tim Connor, the wild red man, wrote in the name of Bakunin that he would be free.

COMRADE AND BROTHER-IN-ARMS, NECHAYEV, OLD MATE,

THEY ARE HOLDING ME AGAINST MY WILL BUT I SHALL BE FREE. I AM THE RED WOLF I SHALL AVENGE

THE VICTIMS ARE THE BLACKS AND THE LOST TRIBES THE SIX MILLION THE IRISH AND THE INDIANS ALSO THE STARVING AND THE BURNERS WHO ARE PURE

I AM THE AVENGER THE RABBLE

YOUR OLD PAL IN FREEDOM

Olive said, 'I don't know whether to laugh or cry. How on earth did he get it out? What do we do about it?' Bob watched her. She read the crumpled paper without touching it, they were having breakfast late: without the children or the sound of Willi moving about, their routine had slipped, after all. This

morning she had slept late and he had seen her wake, fighting consciousness as she always did, sullenly acknowledging it, rejecting again then finally accepting, collapsed on the pillows her thick hair spread around her, smiling in contempt of herself in an attitude which was also a cover now for the panic she imagined she hid from him, each morning. Then, at her most courageous and abandoned, impoverished and daring, she used to be at her most sensual; now he could not have touched her any more than he could have prayed that afternoon in the church or struck her across the face. He had slept well, he felt better: he brought her a cup of tea and they were as tender, as careful with one another, as hurt children.

'I don't see what we can do,' he said. The note lay on the table between them; Bob picked it up and Olive read it again over his shoulder as if at a second reading it might yield a clue or a message between the lines.

'It's queer, isn't it? Like a voice from the dead.'

Bob pondered, 'We could ring the hospital. You know Tim, he could get out any time he liked. I'm surprised they've kept him in so long. Maybe we ought to let them know.'

'No!' Her vehemence startled him. She picked up the dishes and slapped them down in the sink, started washing up at once, when normally, in this odd, desolate holiday they were having she would have sat for half an hour at least over more coffee, cigarettes, frowning and yawning at the paper. At the sink in her loose, shabby dressing-gown, the muscles of her shoulders taut as though she expected to be speared in the back, Olive appeared to him suddenly as she was when he first knew her: too thin, younger, spiky with passion and conscience. Bob felt ashamed of what she must have endured, her kindness and her patience (patience being the last gift she would claim for herself) all this time he had been ill. Strangely this surge of simple, sentimental guilt and gratitude pained him more than anything he had felt at the worst time of his illness. As he went up and awkwardly embraced her, clasping her shoulders, he expected, felt he deserved even, to be thrown off, but she turned and like a shocked child hung on, her face butting him. Then remembered herself. 'Sorry, what a fuss about nothing.'

But several times through the day, driving down to the cottage and back, she returned to the subject of Tim Connor. On

the outskirts of London the smog dispersed a little and by the time they reached Dorking the sun, more like a moon, had struggled up and appeared as a sullen disc above the banks of mist. 'An Australian anarchist of Irish extraction—it's a weird mixture,' Olive remarked. 'I'd never thought of Australia as a hotbed of revolution, or a hotbed of anything, for that matter.' Just in time she stopped for a herd of cows crossing the road, so meek, so heavy; Jerseys, their faces more like deer than cows with the damp film-star eyes fringed with dark lashes. Their flanks, beginning to steam as the day warmed up, pressed against the car, and they gave out plumes of misty breath. 'This bloody fog!'

'The C.P.'s pretty strong there,' Bob said. 'But Tim got his politics in the R.A.F. A lot did. To be in the ranks in the war, especially if you were a hothead and a barrack-room lawyer like Tim—it was the kind of atmosphere that bred politics.'

The cows had moved on and Olive went into gear. 'Yes, socialism, I can see that, or communism. But anarchism? It all seems so absurd, like the student nihilists in Turgenev. You know, black cloaks, false moustaches and bombs. Poor Dulcie, d'you remember, they were actually living for a while with a bomb under the bed?' Speaking of this episode which had seemed, in the context of their lives then, bizarre but not unnatural, brought back intact a vision of that house in which she had lived with Dennis and the Connors and first met Bob. Was the person she had been then really dead? Did she preserve that ghost of herself for the same reason she held on to the wraiths of Dulcie and Tim as they had once been, because she feared to change?

In the valley, going down to the cottage, the fog was thick again and conversation became impossible. They crept down the hill behind a grinding lorry and only later, when they had got a small oil stove going and were drinking coffee they had brought in a flask, laced with rum, did Bob return to the subject of Tim Connor. 'The anarchism came after, I think. In Tim's mad way, it was quite logical: the state's rotten, do away with it, do away with politics; Marxism was too slow for him, he'd no time to wait for the state to wither away.' Bob smiled, remembering something.

Olive was now on her knees measuring the hearth for a stove. She sat back on her heels. 'I looked up Bakunin the other day in

one of Tim's books. It made sense of what Willi said about revolution in Africa. It's obvious, if you've been ground down for years, if you're starving, you're more likely to turn to violence. Poor Freddy M'buto—he's going home soon, you know.' She wrote down the measurements on her pad, looked round, wondered what else could be done; no point in spending much on a weekend place that was rented anyway. Yet she had dreamed, romantically, of bright curtains flapping in a spring breeze, flowers, and she was disappointed. She had never seen the cottage before at this time of the year and it was a shock she hid from Bob, as she had hidden so much lately, how small it was and how run down: all the pointing outside was crumbling, the gutter cracked, the walls damp, the garden overgrown since their efforts in the spring; and under the sink she found a fine lacing of fungus. A couple of windows had been broken and there were signs that someone had slept there—not so much visible evidence, though a pitcher had been smashed and there was a month-old newspaper in the lavatory, as a feeling, a presence. Bob seemed to notice none of this, but neither had he shared her dream; Olive had made this trip an excuse to get him out of the house and in his present state it appeared to make no odds to Bob where he was, though he did not care much to be alone. He would help her clear up, he would sit in the car, talk coherently, she knew even how he would re-enter their house picking up the evening paper, putting it down, taking off his coat, sitting in his chair, going to bed. Nothing, no amount of content or intimacy, had overlaid that first vision she had had of Bob, as a homeless man, and it was sharper now than ever before.

This was a selfish enterprise in which her husband had no part, yet as they locked the door and put the key back under the plant pot there was a moment of understanding between them. 'It's awful, isn't it?' Olive said. 'It's so much smaller than I remembered.'

'It only needs a lick of paint. I'll drive, shall I?'

'But Tim . . . I don't believe he's mad, but I can't understand. I keep thinking about him, what drove him, what would happen if he got out, Dulcie and the children. I should have found her, I feel guilty about that. I don't know if he's an idiot or the last hero.' Suddenly, going away, at the top of the hill she gripped his shoulder, and asked him to stop. 'Look!' The sun had fin-

ally broken through and the whole valley was laid out before them: almost totally bare except for a few holly trees and larches, and the windows of the cottage, flashing in the sun. 'Isn't it beautiful!' she said, and as she spoke the last threads of mist dissolved and the plain was fired by that strange, fragile English brilliance: an unearthly light.

Halfway home, at the same point where they had stopped for the cows on the way down, they were held up by flashing lights, one-way traffic. Bob got out to look. There had been an accident, in the thickening fog a lorry had crashed into a car and three vehicles had piled up behind. The human mess had been cleared away but the wreckage was still strewn all around, the flattened, mangled cars, the great lorry unmarked but tipped on its side like a dying elephant.

'It's all right, we can go on.' Bob sat behind the wheel, clenching and unclenching his fist.

'What's wrong with your hand? What happened? Have you cut it?'

'Let me look.'

'I tell you it's nothing.' He yelled at her with sudden, terrifying violence. 'It's nothing, nothing at all!'

Now, when he was farther from her than he had ever been, in the dim little car in the fog, Olive was aware of a weird spurt of sexuality between them, so intense she found it hard to breathe. She felt Bob could have killed her now and she had never desired him so much. He asked the way, she checked the map with a torch, lit his cigarette, put it to his lips. She would never have imagined that such ordinary exchanges, a dull day really, could have been so charged, so thick with danger.

Olive brought in coffee and as she poured wondered in what way specifically David Wright had aged. He had seemed pathetically pleased to be asked round, a little tired, too talkative, yet there was nothing you could pin down. When she hung up his shabby raincoat it smelled of a dead animal. She asked about Daphne. 'I'm sorry I haven't been to see her lately.'

'Up and down, you know, up and down, but she's getting on well. These new pills seem to help.'

'I'm glad.'

The talk was general for a while, Institute news, the weather,

then Bob asked: 'How's the committee?'

David Wright pulled off his spectacles and wiped them with a grubby handkerchief. Without them, Olive thought, he looked like a mole and she liked him better; she felt nothing maternal for him—her practicality had never taken that turn—but in a friendly, comradely way she would have liked to mend his clothes, give him a good meal and boil his handkerchiefs. 'It's not going so well, I'm afraid.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. I thought it was flourishing.'

They discussed the reasons for the breakdown of the committee. Since Bob resigned they had merged with a more militant, left-wing group: this made sense; obviously, though they would have liked to cut through politics, to do without them, the irony was that they were impotent without the machinery of politics. It hardly mattered which party but no amount of good intention could take the place of professional experience: 'Which was why we needed you so much,' Wright said to Bob, whose only reaction was a slight smile and a shake of the head. 'It's a long time since I was a professional, as you call it. But I know what you mean. The only problem is, you can't use politics without being used yourself. Then you've lost your freedom.' Wright looked more cheerful, brisker, on his home ground teasing an intelligent student. Freedom was a pathetic fallacy, he announced, no one was free, everyone had obligations, you could spend your life trying to avoid them and at the end what could you say? You had hurt no one, you had helped no one. His face was so smooth with honest conviction, yet Olive felt a shudder of her old distaste for David Wright, the honourable man who had done more than she ever would, whose aspirations were impeccable, while his wife went off her head.

So the committee had broken down because it was the wrong time perhaps, too soon, the young, like Alan, resented the political implications, the middle-aged were tired, the press hostile, peace just another word, a vague dove.

When David had left late, after midnight, Olive opened the windows to let out the smoke and thought of the relentlessness of history, how it repeated itself, brought you back again and again face to face with the same issue: the collapse of Dennis's group at the end of the war, the breakdown of the committee.

The first had been a great loss to her but her attitude to the second catastrophe was ambivalent, she said as much to Bob. 'I wanted them to succeed, but I never really believed it would come to anything. Of course it was different for us—for me anyway—after the war there was so much to be done, we simply had no time to think in global terms. It never passed through our minds that a few people could get together, that a few hundred or thousand individuals, with no special powers, could actually sit down and calmly plan to change the course of history. Well, you did I suppose, you must have done?'

'It hasn't been like that for a long time, for a communist in England. We were more like parish priests, without a congregation, cut off from Rome. And with politics, there's always evil somewhere, power and violence. There might be one moment in history, as there was for my father, when politics and justice are the same, but you're lucky if it happens once in your lifetime. And yet what David said was true. He'll get nowhere without politics.'

'And private life?'

'I don't know. I don't know if that's possible.'

She dared not follow this up but instead she emptied the ashtrays and slammed down the windows. 'You know who I'm sorry for?' Olive said lightly and reasonably: 'I've never liked David Wright but it was a marvellous idea. If the committee's really finished, it'll be hard on Alan and the others, hard on Elizabeth if by the time she grows up, there are no causes left.'

Bob grinned. 'Maybe Tim and his pal Bakunin will have the last laugh and they'll be revolutionaries—Elizabeth and Paul and Danny and the rest of them. They'll be nothing like us, I'm sure of that.'

'If they live long enough I suppose they'll make fools of themselves too, in their own way, just as we did.' Now, at this late hour, Olive had decided to wash her hair again—it had never seemed clean since her mad bonfire—and she looked up from the sink, her face streaming, eyes squeezed tight shut like a child. Bob passed her the towel and when she was crouched in her slip in front of the stove, swinging her hair from side to side, she admitted that it was the bitch who had spoken, out of tension. 'They might do better than us, I hope to God they do. Though the present lot are so level-headed they make me feel like an idiot child, they're so old, they seem to be born old

nowadays.' She pushed her fingers helplessly through the thick mass of her hair. 'It's no good, it's hopeless, I can't get a comb through it.'

'Here, let me try.'

She knelt mildly between his knees while he combed her hair. He said she should bring the children back and she knew he would be better soon, on the surface their life would return to normal. Yet even while his hand trailed down between her breasts, and they were so heavy and thick they could hardly stagger to bed, she had this vision of him leaving her, physically walking away. His short, furry hair, now quite grey, the younger, active man's body, white from an English winter, the full sex butting against her belly: both were aware of this; ripe, carnal they had never spun it out so long, never been so curious or greedy with one another, never so generous. They were coarse and at the same time infinitely delicate, torturers probing the most secret and private areas of sensation. They slept like soldiers and she woke to find he had turned on the lights and was spreading her damp hair over the pillow, licking the hollow at the base of her throat, and her breasts, all down her to the other, coarser hair until the bitch abused the subtle, passive woman and screamed out loud, clawing him in. They had never before used one another like this.

22

THERE was no point at which Bob could look back and say, I was better then; it was a strange, slow cure, but then such a vague illness in the first place. He had expected to be reborn or perhaps destroyed, but instead he went back to work, had another week off, decided to chuck in the job and by the next Monday was back at the garage putting the books straight, having a beer in the pub with Jack at lunch-time, going home. He still slept badly so he suggested, Willi's room was empty, for the time being he might as well sleep up there.

They had a card from Willi in Berlin and an envelope from Alan in Spain, promisingly bulky but, as it turned out, as cryptic as any of Tim Connor's mad signals. Opened, sealed, misdirected, re-addressed half a dozen times, it must have been a month on the way and contained no letter but a drawing for Elizabeth and a blurred print of three young people walking up a street, which might have been any street in the world. Polly was responding well to treatment and began to speak of Miss Fraser much as she referred to her hairdresser. She had put on weight and done up her house; Olive was glad to be impressed by the newly sanded floors, though startled by the furniture: starkly modern and expensive. Only the first-floor drawing room had been completed but this, apparently, was to be the key to the rest of the house, white walls, long black sofas, paper lamps like orange pumpkins. Very handsome, the work of some new young interior decorator Polly had, as she put it, snapped up. 'We agreed at once, all that old stuff had to go. I think we all get too cluttered up, don't you?'

Olive murmured something in response. She had no feeling, one way or the other about the furniture, what concerned her was Polly, though it seemed there was no cause for concern. She thumbed through the swatches of unbleached linen, curtain material Polly had produced triumphantly for her inspection.

'What are you doing now? How's Edward?' They discussed the curtains, Polly said Edward had put off his Russian trip till March, it was quite unnecessary really. She'd been hysterical about it but Olive was quite right, she'd been right about everything, Miss Fraser had made her see everything in a different light. 'She's wonderful, Olive, I feel for the first time I can lead my own life, I'm free. Any woman can have a child or worship a man, but if you can only see how degrading that is?' Clearly, the mention of her husband irritated Polly but when she spoke of Miss Fraser a closed, smug look came over her face, the expression of a woman with a secret lover.

They drank vodka and Polly made omelettes. Over coffee she drank more vodka and turned the tables. 'You don't look well.'

'It's the time of year.' Obviously, Polly was cured: she was minding other people's business again; but was there a subtle difference or did Olive imagine that a once heavy-footed kindness had become something else, something more aggressive and less generous? In any case, Polly was not going to let her off.

'You're nervous,' she said, 'I can see that. You're smoking too much.'

Olive smiled cautiously. 'I thought I was supposed to be strong?'

'I shouldn't have said that, I was ill. When you feel like that you think you're the only one who has ever suffered, no one else has a care in the world. But you're not happy, are you?'

Olive shrugged, embarrassed, obscurely depressed by the expensive new room, the new Polly. 'Bob's better. It's been a difficult year but that's over ... I've nothing to complain of, I'm perfectly happy.'

'You're happy because Bob's better?'

'Well naturally.' Olive ground out her cigarette in an ashtray as big as a birdbath—Mexican, Polly had said, hand-thrown. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, Polly, I know you've never liked Bob, but I love him and if he's got through a bad time, of course I'm happy. Everyone's a bit low, you always forget how awful the winter is in London. But the children are well and in a couple of months we can go to the country for weekends. Did I tell you, we've taken the Greens' cottage?'

Polly was still drinking but the drink seemed, if anything, to sober her. Olive had never seen her so heavily earnest. If she had not loved Polly, she would have said she was triumphant.

'Really, Olive, you must stop thinking about Bob and the children, it's time you thought about yourself. You're an unhappy woman because you have no existence of your own. You should leave him.'

'Why on earth should I do that? Are you planning to leave Edward?'

'That would be pointless. Edward understands. I intend to make a life of my own.' Polly had lost her sense of the absurd, she was genuinely baffled that Olive did not take her seriously. Olive left as soon as she could, before something irrevocable was said to break their friendship. She felt that Miss Fraser had a lot to answer for.

She was angry with herself, for Edward and for what she and Edward had done to Polly, then she wondered, what else could they have done? It was all very well to be sentimental about madness or the kind of intensity of feeling which had made Polly ill, but as a way of life it was hardly practical. Perhaps Olive was angry because there was a grain of truth in Polly's diagnosis. Whatever the reason, neither anger nor her sense of the ridiculous sustained her for more than half an hour. By the time she turned the corner to her own house, all Olive felt was a vague sadness, as much for herself she suspected wryly, as for Polly.

It was Saturday afternoon, Elizabeth had been invited to play by a new family which had moved into the cul-de-sac: there were five children, the oldest eight, the mother a cheerful, competent girl who wrote children's books. The father worked in television; when they went for walks the husband and wife each carried a baby on the back in some kind of harness, like Eskimos. They made their own beer and grew vegetables, with natural compost. Elizabeth had taken to the Brownings with one of those violent passions of which solitary children are capable, and spent more time down the road than she did at home.

Passing the Brownings', the house with the lime tree, Olive saw Elizabeth playing in the garden with the boys. The ground was frozen and they were all in Wellington boots, trying to crack the ice with their heels. Bored, with the abruptness of young children, the boys began some game of their own; Elizabeth hung back for a moment, still stubbing the ice with her toe; she did not see Olive; her cheeks were red, her pixie hood had

fallen off and her dark hair was plastered to her head in damp whorls as it had been the night of the election party. She ran after the boys but they did not want her, they were involved in the violent rituals of their own mysteries, old enough to exclude her but still too young for kindness. Elizabeth moved a little way off, her face crumpled, she might have cried. The bitch in Olive wanted to run into the garden, to snatch up her child and abuse the boys and it was a struggle to harness that loving, possessing part of herself. Elizabeth went back to cracking the ice, first in a desultory way, then with stolid application. Jill Browning waved from the window. She was dressing a tree. Olive waved back. She had almost forgotten Christmas.

Paul was awake but crowing happily in his cot, enchanted by his own fingers, by the looming giantess. With Paul Olive could still be four-eyes but she went on, up to Willi's room.

Bob was making bookshelves. He had bought seasoned wood, sanded and varnished it, set up a small workshop, he had transformed the room. He could not sleep so at night when he was tired of reading he worked quietly. Olive went to the window as she always did in this room; there was a bonfire in the Brownings' garden and children were dancing around it. Bob had fitted a lock, the room had become a cell or a prison; Olive knocked now before she came in. But he seemed pleased to see her and asked about Polly.

'They did a good job. She's cured, or nearly cured.'

'You don't sound so happy?'

'Honestly, I'm not sure what I feel; I hardly know her any more. She's quite herself again and yet it's like talking to a zombie. For two pins she'd have marched me off to Miss Fraser.'

'You?'

Olive smiled and ran her finger across the newly sanded wood. She did not care to sit down in this room. It was ridiculous: once she would have thrown off her coat, laughed, and told Bob straight out—Polly says I should leave you. Now she shrugged and said, 'Perhaps she's right . . . she said I was out of sorts. Which doesn't mean I'm off my head.'

'You're the sanest woman I know.'

'You'll be telling me next it's the time of year. Which reminds me, we must get a Christmas tree.'

'Would you come to Paris with me?'

'Paris?' It was as vague as the moon, she had no idea of it, of her husband going to Paris. But Bob would go because he had been asked and had decided to accept; he was even excited to be addressing an international conference, European at least. Pink rather than red, he said, he'd simply be a cheer leader; but Thorez was down as a guest speaker, though there was no knowing if he would turn up. Olive shook her head. 'I don't know. I don't see how you can do this.'

'Because I've given a dozen lectures a year at the Institute on the history of Trades Unionism in England. They were asked to put someone up, not an academic, and God knows, I'm not that. I simply go to Paris, speak for half an hour and come home, expenses paid. Unless I hang on for a look at Thorez, or unless we go together and make a holiday of it.'

'David Wright put you up, I suppose?'

'Yes, he did, as it happens.'

'Why doesn't he do it himself?'

'Because he knows damn-all about Trades Unionism.' Her mood baffled Bob. He put down the sander and asked quietly, 'Why don't you want me to go?'

She did not know. She found it impossible to explain that she could not bear to see him diminished like this, making something which had once been the fibre of his life the subject of a half-hour paper. Also, she was afraid of him going away. 'When will this be?'

'March. Only two days. But you'll think about coming? Catherine could have the children or your mother could stay. And you've never been abroad, have you?'

She would not go to Paris, she knew that, but she admitted, yes, she was tired, the change might do her good. His sadness and perplexity touched her, 'It would be marvellous to get away. Of course I'll think about it.'

The tree was very beautiful, not the kind of chopped-off weedy specimen you found in most London markets but a sturdy, rooted conifer which could be planted after the festival and expected to outgrow and outlive them all. Jill Browning got it from a little man, it was delivered on a horse-drawn cart and it took Bob and Thomas Browning to get it into the house.

The ceremony of carrying in the tree, the spines pricking his hands, his cheek laid against its thick sweetness, setting it up in

a tub, eased Bob in the same way that his carpentry in Willi's room comforted him. In that sense, though in no other way he could define, his recovery was a resurrection: he was reborn into the physical world not so much through his eyes as his hands, a process which had begun, perhaps, with Willi's chess-set. He had no idea if this would be a continuing process, if the cure would spread to his eyes and his mind and his heart, if he had really changed. He had never been anywhere near going off his head, he knew that, yet this had been the strangest period of his life, more violent than any of the many acts of violence he had committed. It seemed impossible that such an upheaval should be fruitless yet this was a fact he might have to accept. All round the coast of England, the old man told him, the sea had encroached for centuries, drowning cattle and men, churches, cities, flowers, trees, bells. Bob had walked out miles over the frozen flats to listen for a bell, but all he had ever heard was the ice cracking.

Christmas had been far from their minds but it overtook them. Jill Browning brought in mince pies, Polly arrived with presents, there were people in and out of the house. Mrs. Armitage would rise from the grave for the two days of Christmas and made it clear, in small ways, that as a force she was by no means dead. Catherine, eight months gone, admitted that she missed a Christmas tree, not that Sam would mind but it would be hypocritical, wouldn't it?

Once the tree was dressed and the children in bed they were too exhausted to go up themselves. Olive realised this was the first tree since they had been married, since before the war, since she was a child. They were drinking wine, Spanish rot-gut which would give her a headache tomorrow but tonight she was pleasantly sleepy, dazzled by the expression in Elizabeth's face when she first looked up at the tree, and by the electric candles, their reflections little tongues of dancing flame in the black window. The first night of peace Olive and Catherine had stood at Mrs. Armitage's window and watched the children file around the square carrying candles; the woman she had been then, or the girl, rather, seemed to Olive more distant even than her childhood, yet it was not so long ago. So raw she had been, so intense, self-righteous, an admirable prig. Had she changed, after all, not by will but like a stone under the mild erosion of

ordinary, daily experience? She felt as much as she had ever done but her feelings now were blurred, inexpressible, her fears secret. One day she would be content as she was tonight, living like a cavewoman in her flickering bivouac; the next, probably the next morning, she would see the tears in the fabric, be brought face to face with the crazy female who burned Willi's manuscript. It was true, she had lived for thirty-odd years, married twice, had two children, and in all that time she had never belonged to herself. 'Polly has a sort of stainless steel Christmas tree, all spikes. It's strange, isn't it, that quite shocked me, though Polly didn't notice, she's so proud of it. She's taken up with this arty set now, you know—they're all right, some of them are very clever. But there's something glazed about her enthusiasms. It seems a long time, doesn't it, since you made her cry at that funny party. What was it all about? Happiness? Well, I suppose you could say she's happy now, though not in a way she ever expected.' Olive turned off the tree. It was midnight, Christmas Day. 'It's been a queer time.'

Bob rested his hands lightly on her shoulders. 'A bad time for you.'

She was about to accept his good-night kiss, to say something vague, kind, when the bitch snapped out: 'I couldn't help you, that's what I couldn't bear! You never let me help you.'

She thought she would never stop weeping, she was actually choking with tears, hardly able to catch her breath; at some point she saw him standing helplessly in the bathroom door and yelled at him: 'I can't live like this!' She sat stiffly while he brought her a glass of water.

'You'd better have a couple of my pills. Or do you want to talk?'

Olive dragged a cold sponge across her face. She was shaky still but no longer hysterical. 'Polly says I should leave you.'

'Perhaps you could do with a few days on your own.'

And where would she go? She could not see herself alone, how she would live. She had never dreamt that she might be the one to leave him. 'We'll see. Perhaps I will have those pills. But don't you need them?'

'I don't take them any more.'

On the landing he touched her hand so wistfully, with such guilt in his face, she thought for a moment he might follow her into the room but instead he went on, up to the attic. A tempor-

ary arrangement had become permanent. Olive saw the pattern of the future, if she stayed: Bob would go to Paris but he would return; they would make love sometimes but never in Willi's room: in this sense he had left her.

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23

'WHY on earth is he going to Russia? No one goes to Russia. Have you been to Russia?'

'Oh me, I haven't been anywhere.' Olive moved away but smiled, not liking this silly young man, doing her duty by Polly, aching for Bob off to Paris, Edward to Moscow, Willi gone, Alan gone, Freddy M'buto soon to go. Sorry for herself, when she was honest, and disgusted by a self-pity which could not be rationalised. Self-fear was perhaps nearer the point. As if living in her skin there was an ugly sister who drove her reasonable self to examine some mad extremities. But on the surface, to her children, her husband, anyone who knew her or met her at a party, Olive was a sensible, good-looking woman in her thirties. Her mother might not die this year, after all; even Mavis held on, the world had not ended, Daphne Wright believed in flying saucers.

At Edward's going-away party Olive admired the furniture and listened to a group discussing the rumour of Stalin's imminent death. Nonsense, Polly declared, that brute will live for ever. Someone said, there'd be war over Berlin in a year, Uncle Joe would never stand for German sovereignty.

'I don't see why he can't put up with it if we can.'

'Good old Polly, you tell him.'

'Looks as though the balloon's going up, anyway.'

Olive had heard nothing about this. She looked for Bob but could not find him, he had said he would come on later, when the baby-sitter arrived. Enid Green was sitting in an Eames chair, her legs apart, gobbling crisps; Polly had started collecting people and Enid was one of the first. She was expected to be a character, to shock, she knew this, and Olive felt obscurely ashamed, wished she could like her better, wished she had not come. Not that Enid cared, she was having the time of her life. She grinned at Olive. 'Smart friends you've got. Bloody awful chair. You look down. You've heard about Tim Connor, then?

He's done it this time. You know he's out.'

Olive sat down. 'I didn't know.'

'How the other half lives?'

'About Tim.'

Enid was ridiculously Welsh, putting it on though she'd never been west of Malvern for twenty years. 'Oh you don't want to worry about him, love, he'll bury us all.' She had the Celtic perception too. 'But you are worried about him, aren't you?'

'Yes, I'm worried. In a way I hoped he might get out.'

Enid was considerably less drunk than she appeared. She gave Olive a brown, sharp look. 'And now he's out you want him in again?'

'No.' Olive brushed a speck of ash off her lap, remembered Tim's last mad letter, the pyre on which she had sacrificed Willi's history, wartime conflagrations, the bonfire in the Brownings' garden and the children dancing round it, the way the stench of burning clung to the lining of your clothes and your mind long after the ashes had dispersed. On Boxing Day, wolfing cold turkey, Mrs. Armitage had announced that she preferred to be cremated, she had no intention of feeding the worms. This was the kind of remark she would make now from the middle of a field of common sense. Olive looked out at the spring dusk, the lights of Battersea across the river, a couple embracing by the embankment, a dog taking itself for a walk. 'No, I hope they don't catch him, but it's strange to think of him out there somewhere. I hadn't realised you knew him?'

'I knew of him, I never mixed with him much. The Party can do without his sort.' In her stolid vehemence Enid looked more like a pug and more admirable than Olive had ever seen her, a woman of forty, a slapdash wife and mother but constant in her own narrow way, a patriot to herself.

Polly had put herself into the hands of a couturier. The dress she wore was a brilliant saffron tent which profited from rather than disguised her corseted ampleness; the effect was not so much voluptuous as regal. No man, Olive thought, would dare to touch. She leaned against the wall and watched Polly, Miss Fraser's artifact, move like a queen bee through her party, her hair rinsed the colour of honey. It was dark now and Olive saw the party, the orange pumpkin lamps and some new lights, candles in globes like imprisoned glow-worms, reflected in the

blind windows. She had changed twice before coming, abandoning a cheap red cocktail dress, bought in a panic, for black velvet, old and cut on simple lines, a garment which had never till now failed to lift her spirits. She was no more content in it tonight than she was in this room or in her own body. Polly swam up. Why wasn't Olive dancing? Was there anyone she would like to meet?

'Truly, I'm quite happy.' Olive realised that more was expected of her before she could be left in peace, yet she could not speak of the image that held her, cut her off from the rest of this party, possessed her so that all she could think of was Tim Connor, or rather the idea of him; as a ghost of the past or the future, she could not have said which. Some secret, possibly hysterical part of herself had conjured his wraith, she knew that—she had never found the courage to visit him, could hardly recall the man's face—yet the thought of Tim had smouldered at the back of her mind for the last few years. Although she knew that it was unlikely to affect her life except in the most marginal way, Olive was as shocked by the news of Tim's escape as if the vision she had seen had been fulfilled and the flames she had imagined licking at the roots of the city had broken out, into the open. The shock, if she was truthful with herself, was pleasurable too. Admiring Polly's dress, she thought, well, if anyone in this room were to speak the truth we'd all seem as mad as Tim. Thinking like this, looking round, everyone appeared grotesque: the young men who wrote or might write books or plays or paint pictures, the women of her own age, some resolutely young, others already a little slack with drink, Shuklov, his hair rinsed blue. Polly's dress had the texture of parchment. 'That's very elegant.'

Polly nodded. 'I told you I was taking myself in hand.'

'No more committees?'

'Honestly, Olive, I don't know how I stood that for so long, those women and their good causes.'

'But they were good causes.'

'Oh yes. But you see, Olive, I've reached a decision: one should live for oneself,' Polly replied solemnly. 'It's amazing what a difference that makes to one's outlook.' She went on, about a show she was planning to sponsor for some young painter, she might even buy an interest in a new gallery. They were in a quiet corner, cut off by a bookshelf from the rest of

the party, though from here they could see the arrivals. Catherine came in, her first outing since Deborah was born; she looked happy but dazzled and her skin had the dead look of women who have recently given birth.

Olive asked, 'You haven't thought any more about adoption?'

'Oh no, I don't think I'd care for that.' Then Polly spoke quietly, the ghost of her old self: 'That was all I wanted, Olive, nothing else, the rest was just rubbish. We used to have such grand ideas once, didn't we? I loved coming to that house, the group, I envied you all, but I was never really part of it. I didn't care a damn, all that suffering, those wrecks.'

'That's not true, Polly.'

'I wanted to change their lives, I suppose. But you can't do that, can you, it's not possible? The people who really help are those who go on when it no longer makes sense.'

'Perhaps you're right. But you did as much as any of us. I think we worry too much about motives.' She was thinking, not of Dennis's group after the war, but of David Wright's committee: if Bob had been less scrupulous, had faced the showdown with Alan and hung on, it was quite possible that his political experience and integrity would have saved the movement, and the movement, in its turn, might have saved him. Commitment, she felt sure, would have followed—you behave in a certain way, make an arbitrary decision and in time that decision puts down roots until it becomes so much a part of the tissue of your life, you can no longer remember how fickle that first choice had been. But Bob, tormented by his motives, had refused to use the committee for his own peace of mind. How we peck ourselves to pieces, she thought.

It was too soon to speak of this to Polly, who was still acting; provided she was never challenged too harshly she might put on this act for the rest of her life; or, mercifully, her true life would become indistinguishable from the performance. 'You won't miss Edward?'

'Heavens, no. I'll have too much to do.' Polly had recovered herself, was earnest again. 'Everything's changed, hasn't it, have you noticed? It's hard to believe we were ever so intense. Do you hear from the Connors?'

'Sometimes. Not for a while.' If Polly had not heard, Olive had no intention of telling her.

'It all seems ancient history, doesn't it?'

'I can't see it quite like that.'

Bob had arrived. Polly turned to him. 'I've just been telling Olive, you can't live in the past.'

Bob smiled, Everyone was dancing so they danced. They were still a couple, a handsome couple, and there was no reason at all, she thought, why they should not go on like this for ever. Nothing irrevocable had been said but then perhaps in marriage the important decisions were those made in silence. She felt his hand on her back, friendly and familiar, nothing had changed, they had been careful by tacit consent not to speak of Paris, though she knew he would go. Reasonably, she condemned herself for hysteria but irrationally she knew, with absolute certainty, that the woman who had drawn her life from the house and the tree no longer existed.

'You've heard about Tim?'

'That's why I was late. The hospital couldn't trace Dulcie so they got on to us.' Bob told her, Tim had simply stunned a nurse and walked out. 'So it looks as if the past is catching up with us, after all. Or the future, if they don't find him soon.'

Olive shivered. 'I keep thinking of him out there.'

Polly insisted they should all go on somewhere. They ate, a large party, in the King's Road, then went on to a club. It seemed to Olive that Edward had aged, or rather was showing his true age, yet he was one of the keenest to keep going. By morning he was frying eggs, his jacket off. Most had gone home and Olive stayed only because she wanted in a vague way to see how this queer night would end. Dawn abruptly sobered the few who were left. The women, as if their fairy godmothers had withdrawn their magic at first light, began to look their age, they had weathered the night less well than the men. There was a sweet scent, of white hyacinths—the only flower Polly would permit in this room—overlaid with too much powder and perfume and laced with sweat. In the sick grey light, Olive thought, one could see prefigured the features of these people in ten or twenty years, if they lived so long: Polly run to fat bossing a salon, Edward dozing into senility, Enid, if she stuck to the guns of her integrity, reduced to one of those carnival figures who haunt the fringes of politics and culture, the kind of old woman who goes to pubs alone. Only Bob she could not see much changed: ageless, classless, he had not been young when she had first loved him and she could not imagine that he would

ever be old. Of course, there would be signs of age—the need for spectacles, illness, death, he would carry gravemarks like the rest of them, but over the last few months since he was cured her husband's face had taken on its permanent aspect. Bob was the one who had suffered, who should be marked, yet if anything he looked younger, his flesh was bland and the night seemed not to have tired him at all.

And Olive? Well, one always saw oneself as an exception. And it was true, she was still only in her thirties. She told herself, I am barely thirty-two, not even halfway through my life and I'm thinking already like an old woman. What am I doing in this room of frozen statues?

The sun came up briefly and they began to talk. A remark dropped into a pond of silence became a murmur and then a conversation. They were drinking very sweet black coffee. Shuklov had vanished like Cinderella at midnight. They were weary and relaxed and each seemed inclined to speak of the first subject which came into his head, a kind of truth game, though there were no startling confessions. Edward talked quietly about Moscow, it looked as if the trip might be a disappointment. They had been warned, they would be herded like a school crocodile, rooms would be bugged, he would never be allowed to meet the only writers he wanted to see. He smiled. 'I suppose I was naïve to expect anything else.'

Enid laid down: 'Conditions in the Soviet Union are grossly exaggerated.'

'You mean Russia is a free society?'

'I mean communist societies are the only ones that are going forward—for every so-called atrocity on that side can't you match it with a dozen in the West? In twenty, thirty years from now, there'll be racial war in America and if you think Africa's going to play uncle Tom to our bwana much longer, you're in for a shock. If you've got to choose—and you *will* have to choose—would you really be an American, a South African? Socialism is change and you don't get change by sitting on your arse. Oh, dammit,' she said and she looked close to tears, 'who the hell's free anyway?'

Catherine said she must go, it was time to feed Deborah. She went to fetch her coat and Olive followed her into the bedroom to patch up her face and comb her hair. Since they all went out for dinner, she noticed, the expensively invisible servants, like

fairies, had emptied the ashtrays, supplied a fresh box of tissues, filled the water jug and turned down the corner of the bed. Once, though she would never have wanted it for herself, Olive had enjoyed visiting the richness of Polly's houses. Now, looking round in the grey dawn, she was oddly repelled by the perfection of the room as if the objects in it were not merely inanimate but dead. 'Whose room is this?'

'Polly's. They have separate rooms now. That's sad, isn't it?' While the night had aged the rest Catherine looked younger, a tired girl. It might have been her ghost in the mirror.

'How's Deborah?'

'She's marvellous. But she's not a bit like Danny, she cries a lot, I don't know why. She was born so easily, I wanted her so much, she's put on weight much faster than Danny, she's healthy but she screams half the day and night.'

Olive could not be bothered with her face. She slammed on some powder and pushed back her hair. If she had a friend, if there were someone she could talk to, would her life really be different? The irony was, Bob was the only person with whom she had ever spoken entirely freely and thoughtlessly and he was now the one person in the world to whom she could not speak. 'Oh, that's quite normal,' she said, meaning Deborah.

'I suppose so,' Catherine took a long time pulling on her gloves. 'Of course you're right, I'm lucky, I've nothing to worry about.'

'Nothing at all.'

Still Catherine hesitated, fiddling with the strap of her velvet bag. 'Mother seems to have settled down, doesn't she?'

'Apparently. You really have got over her, Cat? She doesn't worry you any more?'

'Not at all, no more than a monster in a story, and not even that much now. I don't love her and I don't hate her, I don't feel anything much; that seems rather awful somehow, as if she were dead. I think I'd rather be hated. You know, I saw a wretched old woman in the street the other day, she'd dragged her skirts up to her waist and she was dancing and singing like a girl; I mean, it was ghastly, horrible, but she *thought* she was a girl. I was in a taxi, it had stopped at traffic lights, and no one took any notice, she just went on dancing.'

'Well, mother's not come to that.'

'No ... but to be old. They dope her up in that place, don't

they? Pills to make her cheerful, pills to make her sleep.'

'She's an old woman, she's ill, is that so terrible? If they can help her?'

They could not speak truthfully of their mother but for the first time for months there was an understanding between them. This would pass, Catherine would recover herself. Meanwhile, they agreed, dawn was always melodramatic, this was the worst time of day.

Downstairs everyone with their dreaming faces seemed oblivious of the way the light had changed, from solid gold to grey and now to a queasy spring, a fragile brilliance in which their faces seemed to float a little above their bodies: they were trunkless, ageless, like ghosts. Sam Davies was drinking brandy and talking about some project for a new city in Africa, he was a magician again, sweeping away forests, making barren land fertile, conjuring for them a government house, hotels, schools, cinemas, shops, hospitals. 'And this new architecture,' Enid yawned, 'how do you know they want it, the poor sods?' Olive looked down from space, she heard lost tribes moving, saw the flash of a helicopter hovering like a hungry fly above a jungle clearing, and in the air-conditioned city Freddy M'buto walked about in his English suit. 'It could be marvellous,' Sam said, 'a chance surely for something new?' He smiled, deprecating his passion, 'you always have to *believe* it might be perfect.' For a while they considered this vision, some soberly, some romantically, Enid snorting that it was the same old story, give them their freedom but make sure it's in your image, little England. 'Well, that's hardly fair, is it, little Russia, little England, it's all the same. Except we have every intention of letting them go, when they're ready. It's simply a matter of educating them—what other civilisation do they know? How do you imagine they can shape their own future, without the past?'

'Up the Empire.' Enid's gesture was broad.

Then they got on to the future. Edward said his firm were taking on some very promising science fiction writers, it was arrogant, he suggested mildly, to assume that there was no other intelligent planet in the universe. It had been predicted that we would reach the moon in twenty years, from there it was a small step to the galaxies.

'What do we want with the moon,' Polly said, yawning, 'when we're running round on earth like hens with our heads

chopped off?'

Olive wondered, 'Perhaps that's the best reason, it may be we need to get off the earth . . .' To create another little England on the moon or Mars or wherever, to spread our poison through the known universe and beyond? But she understood, by the end of this century, in her own lifetime if she lived it out, man might travel not to Europe or Africa but to the stars, his bounds. It was in the nature of the beast to break the bonds of reason, she hoped she might live to see it, though she had never left England.

'Well, I suppose we've all got homes to go to.' Enid refused a lift and they watched her stump away along the embankment, like a tired soldier. Catherine and Sam went off in their magic car and Olive said to Polly, 'I'll ring you next week. You musn't worry, I'm sure Edward will be all right. Bob's going away too, you know.'

'So we'll both be widows.' The prospect seemed to invigorate rather than depress Polly, though she linked her arm with Edward's, and he patted her hand.

Olive kissed him on the cheek. 'Look after yourself. Come back.'

Walking home with Bob by the familiar route, along the embankment, up Oakley Street to the King's Road, then through the groves to the Fulham Road, Olive had the same strange feeling again, that for this odd moment in time only the flimsiest veil divided the past and the present, the present and the future: she might have told now, if she had been asked, what would become of them all.

The dusty lilacs in Edith Grove had struggled out and although the buds on the trees were still tight there was the reddish haze which comes before the green and is often unremarked in the city. By tomorrow it might be snowing, that was English weather, but now, before the traffic began to move, the air was warm and sweet. Bob was strolling like a man on a summer afternoon; perhaps he was not even aware of Olive's stretched nerves, her excitement, her depression. They spoke of Edward. Olive said she had an awful feeling he might do something stupid, get into trouble in Russia. Edward, she felt, was a rationalist on the edge of recantation, the most perilous state of all. Her husband thought she was exaggerating, she agreed,

ightly, she was in a queer mood, there was something about the Carters that depressed her nowadays ... 'But Polly's right in ne way, I think I might get a job.'

'That's a good idea.' He was so reasonable.

'The trouble is, I can't think of anything I want to do. Anyhing I *can* do. Perhaps I'll take up flying saucers, like poor Daphne.'

They did not speak of Tim. They were evading another issue, heir own future. 'What was all that about Berlin?' she asked.

'They've closed the frontier with West Germany. There's no ommunication between West Berlin and the Soviet zone, as rom last night.'

So Willi was cut off, they might never hear from him. He had een a myth, then he had become real, now he was a ghost gain, there was no return, there might even be a war. Edward oo was going into that ghost country. The wraith of war had ung over them so long they had grown accustomed to it, it was s ordinary as the weather or the dirty air they breathed.

She thought of the arbitrariness of the seasons, the way the vorld shifted, how overnight the appalling could take on the hape of the acceptable. They went under the lime tree back to heir house. This might be the end, or they could be happy gain; they might even go on living like this. Olive made coffee nd they parted to sleep on good terms, like friends going home. Goodnight, Comrade,' she said, with only the gentlest irony, nd they touched fingers for a moment in an odd, formal salute.

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